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## A Class Menagerie

**How the Memphis Zoo rose from mediocrity to become one of the nation's best.**

by Debbie Gilbert

To longtime Memphians, the transformation is almost miraculous.

Ten years ago, the Memphis Zoo was a place where you might take the family for an afternoon if you didn't have anything better to do. You'd watch the animals pace back and forth in their cages for awhile, throw a few peanuts at the bears, then let the kids ride the rides and buy a molded-wax animal figurine, and everybody would go home reasonably happy. But the zoo wasn't someplace you'd particularly want to take out-of-town guests. Certain aspects of it were a bit shabby, if not downright embarrassing.

Today, the 70-acre park is being described in national publications as one of the best small zoos in North America. And with another renovation set to begin later this year, that estimation could push even higher.

How did this happen?

To Memphis Zoo president and CEO Roger Knox, there was no miracle involved, just hard work and collective ambition. And a lot of money – more than any local public amenity had ever raised in a capital campaign.

“It seemed clear to us that the people of Memphis wanted the zoo to happen,” Knox says.

Indeed, for years Memphians had been dropping hints – and pennies – indicating that they were fed up with the status quo at the zoo. Inside the deplorable old Carnivora Building, a Victorian-style jail that housed the lions and tigers, there was a wishing well into which visitors could throw coins to help “Free the Big Cats.” Eventually, about \$75,000 accumulated in this manner, providing seed money for a 1988 feasibility study on how the zoo could be improved.

“All of our initial plans were aimed toward Free the Cats,” says Scott Ledbetter, who was chairman of the zoo's board of directors from 1989 to 1993. “We first wanted to raise \$5 million for this new exhibit. But we determined that it wouldn't work to simply put a Band-Aid on it. If we were just going to do Cat Country, people weren't going to open their checkbooks to us.”

“We did a poll of executives which showed us that the zoo needed a lot more fixin' than a few million,” says Knox.

PHOTO BY DANIEL BALL



**Memphis Zoo president and CEO Roger Knox**

But how to pay for it? The zoo was operated by the city then, and there was no way the municipal government could afford a large-scale renovation. It was up to “the Breakfast Club” – a group of seven board members who’d been meeting regularly since 1985 – to come up with a strategy.

For a while, they weren’t even sure the zoo would remain in Overton Park. Land on the north side of the park was still federally owned, as part of the right-of-way for a section of I-40 that was never built. Transportation officials had floated proposals to extend Broad Avenue into and over (or even under) the park, leaving the zoo with no room to expand. There was discussion about moving to another location, possibly Shelby Farms. But once the I-40 land was turned over to the city in 1988, the zoo could proceed with its master plan, a grand scheme created by Design Consortium LTD of New Orleans. This was the architectural firm responsible for that city’s outstanding Audubon Zoo, as well as projects in more than 20 zoos nationwide.

“We had some resistance from Mayor Dick Hackett because he wanted to hire a local firm, whether they had experience with zoos or not,” says Ledbetter. “But we insisted on hiring the best zoo architects in the country.”

Next on the agenda was to hire, in January 1989, board member Roger Knox as president of Memphis Zoo, Inc. (MZI), a fund-raising arm of the Memphis Zoological Society.

A native of Fort Smith, Arkansas, who came to Memphis from Houston in 1983, Knox brought with him the corporate background needed to run such an organization. He’d spent 25 years working with Federated Department Stores, and in 1987 was named chairman and CEO of Goldsmith’s. But when the corporation was taken over by Robert Campeau the following year, Knox resigned.

“I had worked in a store of one kind or another since I was 14, and it was time to do something different,” he says. “I took a year off to decide what I wanted to be when I grew up.” And he settled on what must be any child’s fantasy: working for the zoo.

With Knox at the helm, the group needed someone to run the capital fund campaign. Their first choice was Jim Prentiss, the former Shoney’s South CEO who was then chairman of the United Way campaign. But Prentiss initially balked at the idea.

“I told them they were crazy,” he recalls. “I had never been to the zoo and had no interest in it. I turned them down, but about a month later, [board member] Frank Norfleet came back and asked me again.”

Actually, Norfleet and Ledbetter spent about three hours at Prentiss’ house trying to wear down his defenses. He finally agreed to be co-chairman if Larry Papasan, then CEO of Memphis Light, Gas and Water, would carry the other half of the burden.

And soon Prentiss was a believer. “I fell in love with the zoo and wanted to make it the best in the country,” he says. “It became a challenge for me, like starting a new business.”

In order to figure out how much money to raise, they had to decide what the Memphis Zoo needed most. “We sat around the table at my house and graded everything at the zoo,” says Knox.

“There were a lot of B’s, some C’s and D’s. No A’s,” remembers Ledbetter. “The cat exhibit was the biggest F of all.”

The cats were top priority, no question. But the first structure built in Phase I of the campaign was a new

front gate and entry plaza, completed in August 1990. This was a calculated move; MZI hoped that the distinctive, Egyptian-style facade – like nothing ever seen before, in Memphis or elsewhere – would motivate people to donate so that the rest of the zoo could receive a similar makeover.

COURTESY MEMPHIS ZOO



**Artist's rendering of the new polar bear home, planned for the "Northwest Passage" zoo expansion (site plan below). The expansion would inhabit an undeveloped area in the northeast corner of the zoo.**

lemurs new digs, and on the west side of the park, what had been a petting zoo became Once Upon a Farm, a re-creation of turn-of-the-century rural life. Various smaller improvements have been added to the zoo throughout the '90s – the meerkats, for example, and last year's well-received butterfly exhibit, which will return this spring.

"Back by popular demand," says Knox. "You've got to give people something new every year."

With that philosophy in mind, last December the zoo launched Phase II of its master plan, featuring what promises to be some of its most spectacular exhibits yet. The Northwest Passage, set on 5.5 acres of mostly undeveloped land in the zoo's northeast corner, will include animals found in places such as Alaska, Washington State, and the western coast of Canada. Most of the exhibits – those of polar bears, grizzlies, seals, puffins, and otters – will have underwater viewing areas where visitors can look through glass and see the animals swimming.

Half a million gallons of water – kept pure and clear through a process involving ozone instead of chlorine – will be required for these exhibits. "The Northwest Passage can't be done as easily here as in Tacoma or Seattle, where they can pump water straight from the ocean, so we'll have to manufacture our own," says Knox.

But he's convinced it will be worth the trouble. "Underwater polar-bear exhibits are really special," he says enthusiastically. "People are gonna like it. ... Besides, we had an anonymous donor who likes polar bears."

In addition to more than 20 animal species, the area will include about 200 types of plants that grow in the Pacific Northwest. The traditional culture of the region will also be highlighted, through objects such

It worked. Bolstered by already strong support for Cat Country, the fund began to grow. The mayor and city council agreed to a two-for-one match; if the private sector could raise \$8 million, the city would spring for \$16 million. (With additions to the project, Phase I ended up costing about \$24 million total.)

One by one, the buildings went up. In April 1993, the great cats moved into their spacious, naturalistic new home. Later that year, the administration and education complexes were finished. And November 1994 brought the most amazing transformation of all: The dark, odorous Carnivora Building was reopened as a brightly lit restaurant, the Cat House Cafe.

Nineteen ninety-five was another banner year for the zoo. The space once occupied by Monkey Island became the expansive Primate Canyon, while the building that formerly housed primates was turned into Animals of the Night, displaying nocturnal species in a darkened setting. Alongside this building, a Madagascar exhibit gave the

as Native American masks, totem poles, and sea kayaks. It's similar to what's been done in other parts of the zoo such as Primate Canyon, where the entrance is a replica of an African fishing village.

"Throughout a lot of our displays, we have incorporated ethnographic [cultural] elements, as a way of comparing man's relationships with animals in the past versus today," says Memphis Zoo director Charles Wilson.

The Northwest Passage also follows the trend of "zoogeographic" grouping – that is, displaying species that all live in a particular place, rather than grouping all of one type of animal (e.g., the various bear species) together. "You can give people a much better understanding and appreciation of a certain region of the world," explains Wilson.

Besides the Northwest Passage, the other major part of Phase II is an 11,500-square-foot animal hospital, already under construction near what used to be the zoo's east entrance. The current hospital, at only 1,800 square feet, is so tiny that recently acquired animals serving their quarantine must be housed right next to the sick patients. The new, \$2 million facility will provide generous space and equipment for treatment and surgery, and will also give the zoo staff more opportunities to work on research and breeding programs.

Phase II is projected to cost \$30 million, a figure that includes the hospital, Northwest Passage, educational graphics, a contingency fund, and \$3 million toward an endowment that Knox hopes will top \$8 million ("a cushion for lean times," he says).

It sounds like a daunting sum, but \$21 million has already been pledged: \$8 million from government sources (including \$5 million from the city), \$8 million from private sources such as corporations, and the rest from one Memphis couple – Jim and Carol Prentiss.

Just before Christmas, the Prentisses stunned the city by announcing they'd committed \$5 million of their own money to the zoo – the largest individual donation ever given to a Memphis organization.

"We wanted to get at least halfway through the campaign before we announced it to the public," says Prentiss, whose wife Carol is the fund-raising chairman for Phase II. "We wanted to prove first that it was doable."

But what possessed him to make such a personal sacrifice for the zoo? "I wanted to do something while I was still alive," explains Prentiss, who is 70, "and the zoo has become my major project. We thought we could raise the bar on the level of giving in this community. And from the letters and calls we've been getting since this was announced, I think it's going to happen."

The \$5 million is a leveraging tool, a silent way of saying, "If I can do it, so can you." They're about to launch the public phase of the campaign, beginning with direct-mail pleas to the zoo society's 17,000 members. But those with deep pockets get contacted personally.

"During the first campaign, Roger and I made 85 percent of the calls to people who gave \$50,000 or more," says

PHOTO BY ROY CAJERO



**Memphis Zoo, Inc. hoped that the distinctive, Egyptian-style facade**

Prentiss. “This time, Roger, Carol, and I will be the key players in getting major donors.”

**would motivate people to donate so that the rest of the zoo could receive a similar makeover. It worked.**

Both Prentisses have extensive backgrounds as volunteer fund-raisers, so there’s little doubt that the money will flow in. The payoff is expected to come when the Northwest Passage is completed (in stages between 2000 and 2005), and visitors stream through the gates to see it.

“I think it will increase our attendance by 250,000, bringing us to almost a million a year,” says Prentiss. Currently, the zoo averages about 700,000 a year, with a peak of 827,000 in 1996. “The Northwest Passage will bring people from farther away, because there’s nothing like it within 1,000 miles.”

In fact, it’s likely that the zoo will replace Graceland as the city’s biggest tourist attraction. “About half the visitors to the zoo come from outside the Memphis metropolitan area – and they spend money,” says Prentiss.

According to the Memphis Area Convention and Visitors Bureau, the zoo’s annual economic impact is about \$60 million. Zoo visitors who travel long distances make a weekend out of it, staying in hotels and checking out what else Memphis has to offer. And that benefits everyone. Since the zoo’s renovation began in 1990, most of the city’s major tourist attractions have launched construction projects, as if aspiring to the same high standard.

“There’s a synergy that develops [between tourist attractions] that makes the city a better place to live and a better place to visit,” says Knox. “I think the city gets a better return on its money from the zoo than from a lot of other things.”

Beyond the imposing physical structures, what seems to impress visitors most is the way the zoo is run; letters to The Commercial Appeal repeatedly comment on the clean surroundings and the friendly, efficient, knowledgeable staff. The zoo didn’t always evoke such praise, but things began to change on January 1, 1995, when the Memphis Zoological Society (which was merged with MZI) took over management of the facility.

It’s a complex arrangement. The city still owns the land and buildings, but the zoo society has a contract to manage the operation, which the city subsidizes to the tune of \$1.2 million a year. Those who were zoo employees at the time of the agreement still get paychecks from the city, while most new employees work for the society.

“When the two sides came together, we established a creed, a set of values that we all shared,” says Knox, who actually hands out copies of this mission statement on laminated, wallet-sized cards. (“One zoo, one team, many talents,” it reads, in part. “Together we are ‘Building One of the World’s Great Zoos.’”)

“Private management has had a tremendous effect in making the zoo a better experience for the customer,” says Prentiss, who’s now chairman of the board of directors. “We can make things happen, whereas in the situation we were in before, we couldn’t. We’re much more aggressive because we have control.”

“We’re working at being very professional in all aspects of what we do here,” Knox says, adding that he’s particularly excited about two programs the staff has initiated: animal enrichment, which provides the bears, cats, apes, and other intelligent, sociable animals with lots of toys and stimulating activities, so

they don't resort to the stereotypical neurotic behaviors so often seen in zoos; and "keeper chats," informal, regularly scheduled lecture-demonstrations to educate the public.

"It personalizes the experience," Wilson says of the latter.

In addition to the keepers who answer visitors' questions, the zoo has an 18-person education department, up from two people in 1987. The total payroll is roughly 180, though that number can swell as high as 250 with part-time seasonal workers in summer.

Another number Knox would like to see inflated is the total of zoo memberships sold; he wants 25,000 by the year 2000. And after watching memberships grow from 12,000 to 17,000 in just a year and a half, he thinks it's attainable.

What happens after the Northwest Passage is completed? Will the public become bored once the novelty wears off? Zoo administrators hope not, but in any case they have plans stretching far into the next century. "There's a continuing effort to get rid of old, outmoded, aesthetically unpleasing exhibits," says Wilson. "Those WPA-era bear grottoes are next on the list."

Other areas targeted for overhaul are the tropical bird house, reptile house, hippo exhibit, and African veldt. And a section of the Overton Park woods will become a forest exhibit, with walking trails and displays of animals native to the Mid-South. These are all long-term projects, but at least one change should occur as early as this summer: A building near North Parkway that housed the koala exhibit in 1985 will be renovated to display Komodo dragons, the world's largest lizards.

There are critics who argue that despite all the cosmetic differences, modern zoos are little better than their predecessors: The animals are still confined, and humans still go there only to be entertained. Knox, of course, disagrees with this view.

"Our mission, as stated, is to preserve wildlife," he says, explaining that this policy applies both within the zoo and outside of it. "We've established a conservation fund and commission, with the emphasis on preserving animals in their native habitats."

Species conservation, to zoos, once meant simply trying to get animals to breed in captivity; now, it also means trying to rescue those places where animals still live in the wild. The Memphis Zoo is involved in on-site programs in exotic locales such as Belize and the Marianas Islands, but it also works closer to home. In 1995, for example, the zookeepers scraped up \$1,500 to help save the Ghost River, a wilderness area on the upper Wolf River in Fayette County.

The zoo's evolution has been quite a journey for an institution that started in 1906 with a black bear named Natch chained to a tree in Overton Park. For Memphians accustomed to expensive projects that failed to live up to expectations (i.e., Mud Island, The Pyramid, the downtown trolley), the zoo is one enterprise they can point to as an unequivocal success. It even holds out the hope that one day, just maybe, the world will be drawn to Memphis by something other than memories of Elvis. ■

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