

Birth of a Zoo

By Rick Kesterman

Even though much has changed since it opened in 1875, the visitor to the Cincinnati Zoo & Botanical Garden today still has the opportunity to see a few traces of its earliest days. The present reptile house, which was originally the monkey house, is an original building, along with the passenger pigeon memorial structure, which was one of seven similar buildings originally housing part of the garden's collection of birds. The final reminder of the early days is the European house sparrow found throughout the garden, and the entire city for that matter.

Although the sparrow's presence in the area predates the zoo by several years, its introduction is as much a result of Andrew Erkenbrecher's work and influence as the Garden itself. It is part of a loosely related chain of events that ultimately led to the formation of the Cincinnati Zoological Society.

For years, Cincinnatians had battled the region's caterpillars, which damaged not only fruit trees, but also many of the shade trees. From contemporary descriptions, the main culprits were the Eastern tent caterpillar and the fall web worm. Both of these species protect themselves in the larvae stage with webs spun either on the larger branches, as is the case with the tent caterpillar, or on the smaller branches and leaves of the trees' outer growth, which is the case with the fall web worm. Two members of the Horticulture Society, William Orange and James Howarth, described their preferred methods of coping with these pests at a meeting of the Society in March of 1859. Mr. Orange recommended a pole with tarred rags on the end by which the gardener could pull the nest out of the tree and dispatch the caterpillars on the ground. Mr. Howarth, on the other hand, advocated two somewhat more aggressive methods. The first was to scorch the nests with "some inflammable matter," and the second was to shoot them out of the

tree with blank cartridges, both of which could potentially cause damage to the tree. A few months later, an anonymous article in the newspaper called for applying suds from whale oil soap with a sponge attached to a pole. This method had the advantage of killing off the caterpillars and making their webs easy to dislodge while not causing any lasting harm to the tree.

Throughout the 1860s, various articles were found in the newspapers advocating the pruning of trees in which caterpillars had become a problem. While this method could, in fact, remove the egg cases found on the branches, it didn't eliminate the potential for the caterpillars and moths to return. There was also debate over just how much should be pruned away. Some proposed a judicious removal of branches, while others, including Dr. John Warder of the Horticulture Society, "recommended such severe pruning as will leave these cocoons without a live limb to tie to." He further said that the trees, "may be cut nearly as bare as telegraph poles without danger of killing them." While it is true that the caterpillars would starve on a tree pruned so far back, the tree would also for a few seasons lose its usefulness as a shade or fruit tree.

Clearly, there was a pressing need for a solution to the insect problem. An answer started to materialize in the late 1860s. Two German immigrants, Max Wocher and Andrew Erkenbrecher, had been experimenting with importing and releasing sparrows on their properties to control the caterpillars. Wocher lived on the Ohio River two miles west of Anderson Ferry. Erkenbrecher lived on 7th Street, but his sparrows were released near his starch factory in what was known as Starchtown in St. Bernard. Another immigrant, landscape architect Adolph Strauch, was responsible in part for introducing songbirds and water fowl to Spring Grove

Cemetery. In addition to those brought in by Strauch, several lot owners released birds in the cemetery with the hope of establishing them in the trees near their loved ones.

The main thrust of introducing the house sparrow to Cincinnati came in early 1869 when the City Council passed a resolution calling for the purchase and release of sparrows in four of the city parks. Eden Park and Lincoln Park were to receive one hundred pair of sparrows each, while fifty additional pair were to be released in Washington Park and Hopkins Park. Many of these birds became established in and around these parks, yet not all of the birds fared well. An article in the winter of 1871 talks of the sparrows in Lincoln Park as being in a starving condition.

The sparrows around Spring Grove Cemetery had more favorable circumstances in that the gate keeper shared the food intended for the swans with the sparrows. Other individuals continued to release sparrows on their property, so that by 1872, the European house sparrow was well on its way to being an established species in Hamilton County.

With the success of the introduction of sparrows, Erkenbrecher and others were encouraged to form a plan to introduce European songbirds into Cincinnati. In contrast to the sparrows, which were intended to specifically control the caterpillars and other insect pests, the Acclimatization Society, formed in the winter of 1872, had the avowed purpose of introducing a wide variety of songbirds to liven the region with their beautiful melodies. Since most of these birds also included insects in their diet, their presence would also help control some of the area's pests.

The first supply of birds introduced by the Society were purchased and shipped in the spring of 1873 by Peter Schwan, a local cigar maker and bird fancier. The birds arrived at

Schwan's shop on Main Street on April 27th, and a couple days later were distributed to the various members of the Society. The birds were to be kept in their cages for a short while to become familiar with their new surroundings, after which they would gradually be set free. It was thought that the released birds would return to those still in their cages, after which, it was hoped that both sets of birds would remain near the release site once all were set at liberty.

An interesting side story to this is that the store of Peter Schwan had in it a starling that was reputed to be able to sing "'Wacht Am Rhein' with accuracy." This story appeared in the April 28th paper, and according to a later lawsuit, the talented bird was purchased that very day by a Mr. Frederick Hoeltge for \$73.00. Upon getting the starling home, Mr. Hoeltge found that the bird would not sing the song or any song other than the tune which nature had granted it. Ultimately, that November, the judge ruled in favor of Peter Schwan, and Mr. Hoeltge was left with a very expensive starling.

These troubles and the resulting case may have brought about some changes made to the Acclimatization Society. On May 15th, Erkenbrecher announced that, "in the fall, a capable man – but not a bird merchant" would go to Germany to procure the birds for the following year. Erkenbrecher also hoped to interest the City Council, along with some wealthy Americans, in the venture.

Although the Acclimatization Society met several times that summer and autumn, the meeting that was most consequential to Cincinnati's fabric was the meeting held on June 19th, 1873 in a room at the Board of Trade. Following the Society's meeting, Erkenbrecher and Armin Tenner spoke with the members about a new venture that they had been exploring. Tenner, the

secretary of the Society, had corresponded with noted zoologist Dr. Brehm of Berlin about the possibility of establishing a zoological garden in Cincinnati.

This proposal of establishing a zoological garden was favorably received by those present, and a committee was formed to advance the idea to individuals that might be interested in backing this new enterprise. For the next month and half, the preliminary details of forming the Zoological Society moved at a brisk pace. On June 30th, a meeting was held in which the incorporation of a joint stock company was ordered, which was effected on the 11th of July. A minimum of 10 percent of stock needed to be sold to make this incorporation valid. This amount was reached by July 14th, and two weeks later on July 28th, a meeting was called to elect a Board of Governors.

On separate weekends in August, a committee from the Zoological Society visited two of the city parks to determine if either site would suit the needs of the proposed garden. On August 11th, Eden Park was visited, followed by a visit to Burnet Woods on the 23rd. While both locations had much to offer, it ultimately was felt that Eden Park lacked the older tree growth that was present in Burnet Woods. Lengthy negotiations began with the City of Cincinnati, of which more will be discussed later.

The end of August saw Armin Tenner ready to leave for Europe on a fact-finding mission. Tenner was given authority to represent the Zoological Society in the form of a letter addressed to the managers of the London Zoo and other zoological gardens on the continent. In addition, it is likely that Tenner made inquiries at this time in regards to the purchase of birds for the Acclimatization Society's next release of songbirds.

A financial panic in September brought the work on the Zoological Gardens to a crawl. Little was done with the exception of creating a constitution and bylaws for the Society.

The work of the Acclimatization Society progressed at a much stronger pace. In contrast to the efforts of the spring, the birds purchased for release in 1874 were procured several months in advance, giving them the entire winter and part of the spring to adjust to their new environment. On November 28th, it was decided to ask the City of Cincinnati for the use of a vacant house in Burnet Woods to store the newly imported birds. It must have moved rapidly through the City bureaucracy since on December 10th, Tenner returned to Cincinnati with a shipment of songbirds, which were first put on display at the Phoenix building on Vine Street, and shortly after, relocated to the house in Burnet Woods.

On January 5th, 1874, the Zoological Society held its first annual meeting. The first order of business was to ratify the constitution and bylaws, after which officers were elected for the ensuing year. Two weeks later on January 20th, the directors of the Zoological Society met, at which time Tenner presented a report on what he had learned while visiting similar enterprises in Europe.

So far, the Zoological Garden existed only on paper. The lack of a parcel of property was a stumbling block, not only to selling shares of stock, but also to planning the buildings and grounds. A decisive step was taken on February 17th when a proposal was presented to the park board for obtaining a fraction over 45 acres of ground on the southern end of Burnet Woods for perpetual use by the Zoological Garden for its exhibits. This proposal not only required the land, but also stipulated cooperation from the City with regards to water service, security, and proper fencing to be provided at no charge to the Society.

On March 31st, Armin Tenner announced that there would not be any further importation of birds planned by the Acclimatization Society. In the future, the Society would offer advice to those that were interested in pursuing the importing of birds but would not be taking an active role in the actual process. This decision may have been brought about by the anticipated success in the Zoological Society's proposal on the Burnet Woods site.

A little more than a month later, both societies would find their activities centered around Burnet Woods. On a Sunday morning in early May, Erkenbrecher and some of the other members of the Acclimatization Society went to the house where the songbirds had spent the winter and early spring in order to release them into their new surroundings. According to one source:

One window was opened, and a pair of nightingales appeared at the window, rested for a moment, and then flew to the limb of a tree and elevating their heads in the sunshine burst out in joyous song. Within the next few seconds, the birds fairly poured out onto the trees and shrubbery, filling the old woods with melody.

May also began on a favorable note for the Zoological Society. In Mayor Johnson's annual message to the City Council, he spoke favorably of the prospect of the "private enterprise...having a large zoological collection which would greatly add to the [Burnet Woods] attraction and make it a popular resort." On May 8th, the proposed ordinance was presented to the Board of Aldermen, after which it made its way through the channels to the City Council.

While the ordinance had a smooth beginning, it had a rough time with the Council. Since the Zoological Society was a private for-profit entity, public opinion was divided on its obtaining City land for its operation. Finally, after several revisions, the ordinance was passed by the City

Council, only to be vetoed on July 9th by Mayor Johnson. One of the Mayor's concerns was that the Zoological Society, being a corporation, might make decisions in the future that would be detrimental to the park and City's best interests. To lease the land without City representation was his greatest objection. He also questioned if the amount of land proposed wasn't too much for what he referred to as an "experiment." Since it is unlikely that the mayor or those objecting to the ordinance had ever seen a zoological garden, some of their objections may have been voiced through a fear of the unknown.

The Society made some additional efforts to still obtain the Burnet Woods property but finally resigned itself to find a suitable site elsewhere. After a little over a month of searching, the luck of the Society in acquiring a piece of property was about to change.

In late August, Curt Terne, a naturalist from Savannah, Georgia, was in Cincinnati to assist the Society with selecting a site. On September 4th, the Zoological Society came to an agreement with William Wilshire for the lease of almost 67 acres located for the most part in the southwest corner of Avondale. Although it is not known how much influence Terne had with this decision, by the 15th, he had secured the position of superintendent for a period of three months. Around the same time, Theodore Findeisen was hired as engineer and landscape gardener.

The property selected had, at an earlier date, been divided into 20 irregularly-shaped lots. Lots one and two were the property of Thomas French, dairyman. These two lots remained with French while the other 18 were leased to the Zoological Society. There is no mention of any improvements on these 18 lots, but given French's presence on lots one and two, it is likely that at least some of the property was used as pasture.

Julius Dexter in the first annual report of the Society described the land as follows:

The [grounds] rise somewhat broken and abrupt from the Carthage Pike, and then become nearly level, and sloping gently to the north whence they command an extensive view. Three ravines run in or through the land. The most beautiful of these runs along the east line of the property, while the others start from near the middle of the ground, and run out northwardly. They all afford fine opportunity for the construction of pools and ponds.... To the north and east sides, the grounds have some trees.

On September 24th, William Wilshire and his wife Frances transferred two-thirds ownership of the property to William's brother George and A.S. Winslow. The following day, the lease to the Zoological Society was finalized. The terms gave the Society perpetual lease to 63.37 acres in section 15 of Mill Creek Township, with an additional 2.67 acres in section 14. The annual rent for the first five years was to be 5,000 dollars, for the next five years, 6,000 dollars, and after these initial ten years, the rent would remain at 7,500 dollars a year. The terms also gave the Society the privilege of purchasing the property at a cost of 2,500 dollars per acre.

Theodore Findeisen was occupied for much of September in surveying the property and creating a plan for improvements. This plan was accepted by the board on October 5th, and work commenced shortly after. On October 29th, the *Cincinnati Gazette* reported that 180 men were busy grading and beautifying the grounds.

Work continued until mid-December when it was decided to halt further landscaping until the spring. Initially, it was decided to extend Terne's contract as superintendent for an additional three months; however, by the end of the year, the board decided to terminate his employment, along with that of Findeisen. While no specific reason was given for these changes, costs had been higher than expected, and some discrepancies in materials ordered and on hand

may have played a part. Also, while the board was satisfied with Findeisen's general plan, there was some disagreement with his ideas for the placement of structures.

January of 1875 began with board meetings and planning, but apparently, little else was being done to the physical garden. In looking for a replacement for the superintendent, the board began corresponding with some of the zoological societies in Europe in hopes of finding someone with practical experience.

Meanwhile, on February 5th, notice was given by the Society that proposals for "materials and labor in building a fence about 5,800 feet long around the garden" would be accepted until twelve noon on February 15th. Four days later on the 19th, Armin Tenner left for Europe to secure a superintendent and also obtain plans for animal habitations from some of the prominent zoological gardens.

Bids were sought for the construction of a deer house on the 5th of March, and boards and posts for the fences on the 10th. Although construction of the larger structures was put on hold until a new superintendent was employed, construction on smaller buildings and enclosures was revived from the winter hiatus.

With the exception of the buffalo house, all of the structures built for the Zoological Garden this year were designed by local architect James W. McLaughlin. These buildings represented some of his most imaginative work, incorporating features that reflected the origins of the animals being exhibited.

By mid-March, Tenner had found a likely candidate for the superintendent position. Dr. H. Dorner of the Hamburg Zoological Garden was interested, and on March 17th, a contract for

three years was finalized by the board via cable telegram. Tenner was also obtaining plans of various buildings, which he brought on his return to Cincinnati in late April.

An event occurred in late March at the Garden that would be remembered for many years. Animals both donated and purchased had been brought to the Garden for some time, now, and one of the most recent acquisitions came in early March in the form of two lions and a lioness that were purchased from the Great Eastern Circus Company.

On March 25th, at around 3:00 pm, George Schmidt, a young boy, was leading a donkey past the cages holding these lions. Schmidt stopped by the lioness' cage for a moment to have a closer look, which so enraged her that she burst through the bars and attacked the donkey. The lioness soon found that this was no easy prey, for as soon as she buried her teeth into the donkey's leg, he twisted his head, grabbed her by the back, and shook her loose. The lioness made another attempt, but this time, he kicked her in the head. After a couple of additional skirmishes, the donkey was captured and led back to his stable. The lioness escaped from the grounds and was finally cornered and shot later that day.

The donkey was given the status of a hero, and was provided for with the best care possible. The donkey died four months later on July 20th, yet the memory of this occurrence was kept fresh in the mind of future visitors, as both he and the lioness were mounted and placed on view in the Carnivora House for many years.

On April 24th, Armin Tenner returned to Cincinnati accompanied by Dr. Dorner, who was immediately given a tour of the Garden that afternoon. Dorner gave his approval of the fence being built, specifically in regards to measures being taken to prevent dogs and other animals from burrowing underneath. The newspaper stated that, "the heavy part of the grading

has been done already and many of the avenues are about complete. Over 60 men are at work on the grounds every day, and in a few days this force will be increased.” The central lake was under construction, along with a manmade cascade which would carry excess water to a receiving basin. From there, the water could be used either for washing out the drainage system or to flow back into the lake to prevent it from becoming stagnant. At first, Dorner was not entirely pleased with the hilly nature of the grounds. This seems to have changed by the end of the tour, at which time he stated that he found the location to be an excellent one.

Over the next few weeks, Dorner, McLaughlin, and others planned the next phase of work, namely the construction of the major exhibition buildings. Although it is likely that McLaughlin had been working on plans for these structures, certain revisions would have occurred once Tenner returned with the drawings and notes from Europe.

The first major structure built following Dorner’s arrival was the Bear Pits. Located on the northern part of the grounds, the three Bear Pits were housed in a brick and stone structure 88 feet long and 30 feet deep. The central pit measured 20 by 25 feet, while those on either side measured 20 by 20 feet. Each of the three pits contained a basin, along with access to dens located in the walls between the pits. Visitors would be able to view the bears from the front or from a platform located on top of the structure.

Bidding on construction of the Bear Pits closed on May 29th, and on June 7th and 14th, bids were closed on construction and finishing work on the Carnivora House. The Carnivora was in total size the largest of the habitations constructed, measuring 53 feet by 134 feet. The interior contained 16 cages along with keepers’ rooms and restrooms. The southern side of the exterior had eight summer cages allowing outdoor viewing when weather permitted. Eight of the interior

cages were 10 by 15 feet, four 12 by 15 feet, and the remaining four 10 feet square. The lobby was 25 feet wide and 110 feet long. Natural light was emitted through windows on the north side and a clerestory which ran along the roofline the length of the building.

The next building to be bid on was the Monkey House on June 21st. Built in the round, the Monkey House was designed to be 60 feet in diameter with three summer cages on the southern side. Two entrances led into the domed interior, which was illuminated with both clerestory windows and an oculus in the top of the dome. The public space of 38 feet in diameter was surrounded by 12 cages. On the southern half, one cage was 21 feet by 9 feet, and was flanked on either side by two cages alternating between 6 by 9 feet and 6 by 6. The northern half contained seven cages, four of which were 6 by 6, with the remaining three 6 by 9. The largest cage opened into a summer cage which measured 18 by 30 feet. Two smaller summer cages were on either side and were both 8 feet wide and 14 feet high.

Three structures had construction bids in July: the Aviary on the 12th and a Deer House and Kangaroo House on the 19th. The Aviary, although spoken of in the singular, consisted of seven small structures connected by summer cages, which gave the entire grouping a length of about 340 feet. Six of the seven structures measured 22 by 15 feet, with the center building being 27 feet square. The buildings were spaced 20 feet apart and were connected by two summer cages measuring 10 by 12 feet. Two larger cages on either end completed the exhibit. The Deer House and Kangaroo House were both located near the Bear Pits, and were of wood construction. The Deer House was particularly picturesque, being built of rough pine logs with a thatched roof.

An article from August 8th spoke of the “almost incessant rains” that had occurred during the months of June and July. These storms had slowed the progress of construction; however, it was felt that a September opening of the Gardens to the public was not out of the question.

Two factors made an opening in September not only desirable but also necessary. First, many of the subscribers to the Gardens were becoming impatient and wanted to see their investment begin to make money. Second, a large shipment of “Asiatic and African birds and beasts,” 15,000 dollars’ worth, were expected to arrive from Carl Hagenbeck of Hamburg sometime in mid to late August. This shipment was loaded on the Hamburg-America line steamer *Klopstock* with Saloo Bugeo of Africa and Herman Rehnken of Hamburg along to take care of the animals. The *Klopstock*, which left port on August 11th, soon experienced problems with her screw propeller, and on the 14th, docked at Cherbourg for repairs. Two days later, the *Klopstock* resumed her voyage and arrived at New York on August 26th without further incident.

Armin Tenner had left Cincinnati on the 23rd, and was present when the animals were loaded into four Atlantic & Erie Railroad cars for their journey to Cincinnati. The animals, along with Tenner and Bugeo, arrived in Cumminsville early on the morning of August 31st via the Atlantic & Great Western Railroad.

Work of unloading these animals for the final leg of their journey began around 2:30 in the afternoon under the supervision of Tenner and Dr. Dorner. Over a dozen transfer cars and a large crew of workers were at hand to begin the work.

News travelled fast that “there was to be a sort of free animal show, [this] brought all the idle and curious people of the suburb to the scene, men, women and (oh, Lord how many!) children, all anxious to see everything that was going on and all getting in everybody else’s way

as much as possible.” The animals were unloaded without incident, with the exception of a camel who balked at leaving the rail car and a yak who burst through the end of his cage.

Having been loaded onto the transfer cars, the animals were slowly taken up Ludlow Avenue, led by “a big healthy German...with two braces of St. Bernard and Danish dogs.” Immediately behind were the camels, which were followed by the wagons “loaded with fluttering birds, chattering monkeys, and growling wild beasts.” A crowd of onlookers lined the way, and the procession finally reached the Gardens at around 6 o’clock. Upon arrival, those animals that had quarters ready were taken to them and released from the cramped confines that they had been in for the past several weeks.

With the large shipment safely on the grounds, work was focused primarily on finishing as much as possible in anticipation of a September opening of the Gardens. The date chosen, September 18th, was just a few days shy of being a year since the final transfer of land to the Society, and while there was still much to be done, a great deal had already been accomplished. The Zoological Society and countless laborers had transformed an ordinary pasture into a pleasure garden, traversed by three miles of paths allowing visitors to view horticultural plantings and numerous enclosures with creatures from around the world.

In many ways, the opening day did not live up to its potential. Much of this was due to the weather, which was beyond their control. Unlike the previous two years with temperatures in the low 80s, September 18th dawned cloudy with a temperature of just 50 degrees. The rest of the day remained overcast, reaching a high temperature of only 55 degrees.

The Gardens were opened to members and guests at 10 o’clock, giving them ample time to tour the grounds and see the sights. At noon, Julius Dexter addressed a crowd of about 300

including members of the park board and City Council. His remarks began with describing the hopes that the Society had in creating the Garden, along with its future usefulness not only for those seeking pleasure, but also to students of science.

Dexter then called the audience's attention to the two men he felt most deserved the thanks of the Society. First thanking Armin Tenner for his "efficient labor" while serving as general agent, he then drew everyone's attention to Andrew Erkenbrecher, "the father of the Zoological Garden." Erkenbrecher was presented with "a handsome gold headed cane, with deer and camels and things molded upon it, and bearing the inscription 'presented to Andrew Erkenbrecher, the founder of the Cincinnati Zoological Garden, by the board of directors, September 18, 1875.'" Erkenbrecher accepted the cane and stepped away without saying a word. Following some further remarks, the planned events of the day were over, and the general public was admitted to tour the grounds.

Some of the structures, such as the Carnivora and the Monkey House, were not ready for their occupants on opening day, and so these animals remained in their transportation cages until their buildings were ready. The lions, tigers, and hyenas moved into the Carnivora on October 2nd, and on November 7th, it was announced that the monkeys were comfortable in their new quarters, ready for winter.

One final occurrence of 1875 deserves to be mentioned. Two months after Andrew Erkenbrecher received a cane at the opening of the Gardens, Armin Tenner was the recipient of a similar gesture from a more humble but no less sincere group. On the evening of November 18th, 25 employees of the "Zoological Garden went in a body to the residence of Mr. Armin Tenner...and presented him with a gold-headed cane as a token of their regard for his genial and

gentlemanly discharge of the duties of his office.” Following this presentation, the group opened baskets they had brought, and all sat down to a fine meal. Toasts were given, and it wasn’t until midnight that the festivities came to an end. It seems fitting that Tenner should receive such a memento; after all, it was through his correspondence with Dr. Brehm that the idea of a Zoological Garden became more than just a dream.

What had begun as an experiment in pest control developed into bringing songbirds into the area and culminated in creating what was then the largest zoological garden in America. Much of what was accomplished in creating the Garden came from information gathered by Tenner while in Europe, and a great deal of trial and error. There were obstacles faced while creating the zoo, with many more to come in the years following, yet through it all, there was someone or some group ready to save it. Had it not been worth saving, it might easily have been lost when the hard times came.

Numerous changes have occurred to the Garden in my lifetime, yet through it all, I still view it as the same zoo. Much of this feeling comes from the land itself. The founders of the zoo made a wise decision in the property they acquired. The lake, ravines, and slope of the land give the Garden a character that invites exploration, an opportunity to look for and find familiar or unfamiliar animals amidst the landscape that can, at times, seem more exotic than one might expect so close to home.

The ripples from these early beginnings continue to this day, with even more changes anticipated over the next few years. With the zoo nearing its 150th anniversary in 2025, it is clear that the idea started by Erkenbrecher will continue as long as there are dedicated individuals to make it possible.