

HISTORY FROM OHA

A Wild Journey: An Abbreviated History of the Syracuse Zoo

Today's Rosamond Gifford Zoo in Syracuse has experienced more than a century of iterations. Its home, Burnet Park, was born from a merger between the Town of Geddes and the City of Syracuse in 1886.

BY KAREY Y. COONEY

The Town of Geddes wished to become part of Syracuse in order to benefit from a paid police force, fire protection, and the soon-to-be installed water line from Skaneateles Lake. John Burnet, a major landowner in Geddes, offered to sweeten the merger by giving the City nearly 125 acres of his hilltop farm land for a park. The Burnet family stipulated the land always be used as a park and that it should be named Burnet Park. They also requested that \$10,000 be set aside annually to be used to purchase trees and maintain roads and lawns. An additional \$3,000 per year was to be used for general upkeep and improvements. Finally, the entranceways to the park off Milton Avenue and S. Wilbur Avenue were to be paved. Initially the park was used for bandstand concerts, walks, and picnics — followed by the construction of a golf course in 1901.

Area citizens had lobbied for a zoo for many years before one was actually constructed. As early as 1898, a local alderman announced that a gentleman had offered to build and stock a zoological department in a south end park if the city would take steps to fix up the land properly. It was determined that all necessary funds could be generated with help from the public; however, this plan never advanced. But in 1914, the city put aside four acres for use as a zoo in Burnet Park when a group of citizens headed by W. W. Wiard of the Syracuse Chilled Plow Co. bought the remnants of a traveling circus company. Two years later, a stone-based exhibit space was designed for the bears and a pond dug for the waterfowl. The animals kept at the zoo were varied with many procured through generous donations by prominent local citizens. In 1933, the zoo doubled in size with the animals residing in small barred cages as was common during that era. The animals were there strictly for the public's viewing purposes. No attention was given to providing an environment or setting that would reflect the animal's normal living conditions. In 1955 after receiving an extremely poor review from the local newspaper, efforts were made to improve the animals' living conditions and update the grounds. A Children's Wonderland, funded through the Gifford Foundation, was designed featuring miniature structures housing a variety of farm animals with which children could interact. At the same time, additional funds were set aside by the city to renovate the bear den and construct Monkey Island.

Unfortunately, these improvements were short-lived, and by the early 1960s, the zoo was again criticized for its appearance. Various mayors had discussed un-

dergoing a massive update, but funding could not be secured. The Children's Wonderland required cleanup and repair. Again, improvements were made but continued funding was becoming difficult to obtain. Vandalism was prevalent, including the releasing of animals from their cages, killing of animals, and theft and destruction of zoo property. A local businessman formed an organization to investigate the option of purchasing property north of the city and establishing a new state of the art zoo. City of Syracuse and Onondaga County officials were divided in their opinions, but it was generally felt that the zoo should remain in Burnet Park.

The Friends of the Zoo was formed in 1970 and they secured funding to enlarge the zoo to 18 acres, build a fence to enclose the space, include a boardwalk that traversed through a portion of the property, and establish a Western Plains habitat. Various directors had come and gone, adding to the difficulties. In April 1975, the zoo adopted a nonprofit status and it was suggested that a minimal admission be charged for at least a portion of the year. Plans were once again made to expand and modernize the facility. The Friends of the Zoo developed a membership drive to facilitate this goal. John Mulroy, Onondaga County Executive, initially vetoed using county funds to supplement city funding, but eventually came to an agreement with the Onondaga County Legislature to set aside money to finance renovations. In 1977 the county officially took over the responsibility of running the zoo from the city. By 1980, improvements were once again made by expanding the Plains exhibit and beginning development of a North East Woods exhibit. However, the animals continued to reside in bare, dingy cages of inadequate size. These conditions inhibited reproduction efforts — forcing the zoo to purchase additional animals. Visitors also complained about the odor and general cleanliness of the exhibit areas.

In 1982, a \$7.5 million renovation was begun. The community was asked to provide \$1 million in funding with an additional \$2.5 million received from private funders. The Rosamond Gifford Foundation continued as a generous funder for the modernization of the facilities as Ms. Gifford had been known for her love of animals. The renovation took over three years. During this time, most of the animals were either sold or loaned to other zoos. The waterfowl population was moved to Beaver Lake Nature Center in Lysander while seven elk, seven bison, three wolves, a yak and a llama remained in residence because they were either unable to be sold, too old to move, or of good breeding stock. All the

GOING PLACES AND SEEING THINGS —By VIC LAMBDIN



A cartoon from a 1931 newspaper.

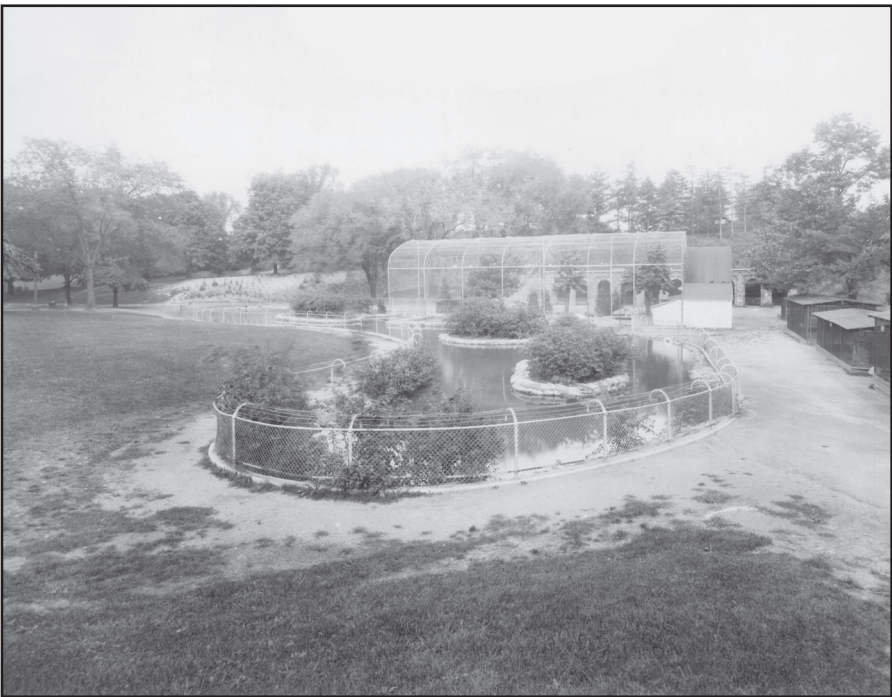


A group of children from Delaware School on a tour of the zoo.

original buildings were torn down with the exception of the main building which was incorporated into the new design. The zoo reopened to great fanfare in August 1986. The final cost of renovation was \$12.8 million and it involved more than seven years of planning and preparation. It was a state-of-the-art facility considered to be a "new breed of zoo" and was only one of a handful of zoos designed with several exhibit areas detailing the evolutionary life stories of the zoo's inhabitants. The new facility also included classroom and research space. National accreditation soon followed.

In 1998, a capital campaign was begun to pay for the construction of a new conservation education center and tiger and rainforest exhibits. The Rosamond Gifford Foundation offered an endowment gift of \$2 million in 1999. This resulted in the changing of the name to Rosamond Gifford Zoo at Burnet Park. The zoo today continues to flourish and is now proud to say that it is continually ranked in the top 10 percent of zoos in the country.

Karen Y. Cooney is support services administrator at OHA in Syracuse.



The Zoo in the early 1930s.