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Earl Brockelsby: Creator and Owner of the Black Hills Reptile Gardens—Recollections

Unlike so many other reptile zoo enterprises that began in the 20th century, the Reptile Gardens was not a short-lived, shoestring venture started by a reptile zealot who wanted to make some money showing reptiles to the public. Testimony to Earl Brockelsby's genius and talents is the timelessness of his creation, the Black Hills Reptile Gardens (BHRG) in South Dakota, USA. More than that, in many ways the Reptile Gardens is a by-product and reflection of Earl Brockelsby. The principles of capitalism on which it was founded and the continuing high visitor appeal of the Gardens not only endures, but thrives beyond Earl's lifetime. Attendance flourishes in spite of the fact that the Garden's formula for peerless exhibits and visitor experiences has changed little over the decades. While much about a visit to the Gardens could be duplicated elsewhere, nothing like it is to be found anywhere. In fact, descendants of many original visitors from the 1940s return year by year, generation after generation, enjoying the kind of indescribable magical adventure that can only be found by taking one's own personal "tropical" safari inside its iconic tropical dome as well as among the many outdoor exhibits and lecture sites.

The Reptile Gardens is not located in a semi-tropical setting. "South" Dakota with its severe winters is no further south than Maine; more precisely the Reptile Gardens is located only 60 miles south of the half way point (45th parallel) between the equator and the North Pole. Although Earl Brockelsby's climate-controlled, animal and plant-filled dome is a tropical realm like no other, during the cold months it is a major expense to keep properly heated.

The Black Hills and its attractions are not on the way to anywhere except for those traveling from the northern Midwestern states to Yellowstone National Park. A stop-over in "the Hills" provides a welcome break, offering travel-weary visitors an opportunity to see several outstanding sites of interest including the Mount Rushmore and Crazy Horse memorials, even though competition for tourist dollars on the national and global scale has diminished the hordes of travelers that once came through the Black Hills during the last half of the 1900s.

RAY PAWLEY*

Curator of Herpetology (retired), Chicago Zoological Park (Brookfield Zoo), Brookfield, Illinois 60513, USA

*Present address: P.O. Box 12, Hondo, New Mexico 88336, USA
e-mail: raypawley@pvtnetworks.net

Yet, the Gardens, a tightly held family enterprise continues as a fresh, modern experience among the oldest attractions in the Black Hills.

FAMILY BACKGROUND

In 1914, Earl's parents, John Earl Brockelsby and Sara "Emma" (Kingsbury) moved to Kadoka, South Dakota (gateway to the Badlands). Set in the context of that time, when Earl was born on 11 May 1916, the Battle of the Little Big Horn was only 40 years old and the State of South Dakota had joined the Union 27 years before (1889). In Florida, the St. Augustine Alligator and Ostrich Farm was already 23 years old.

Growing up in a small frontier railroad town, young Earl developed a deep curiosity about the world. Earl would frequently explore the wilderness of the Badlands, an unforgiving region that became his life-long sanctuary; a desolate world that teemed with 30-million-year-old fossils scattered through ancient Oligocene ash that, in the event of a rain, would quickly become a sticky quagmire. While other young kids his age were working at manual labor, Earl was showing entrepreneurial tendencies as early as the age of 5. He would cut kindling wood to make doll furniture for neighborhood children and then bank his earnings. Although he was very interested in raising various domestic animals such as rabbits and chickens, his senses rebelled at the shock that his pets would ultimately be converted to food. With his early years spent in a rural, agricultural setting, it is not surprising that 50 years later he would acquire miniature Hereford cattle, ponies, and other domestic stock that were exhibited in spacious corrals behind the Gardens—and not destined for the dinner plate.

During his long forays in the Badlands, young Earl developed a passion for fossils and minerals, which he would gather up and sell to the tourists traveling through his part of the world. Then, annually, there was the exotic, compelling world of the circus that would come to town by rail. Once, as a youngster, a performing elephant slid its trunk around Earl's 4-year-old waist and gently hoisted him up onto the big animal's back. That thrill was never forgotten. He also gazed long and hard at a 20-foot Anaconda skin that an explorer in a sideshow had brought back from the Amazon. To Earl, Kadoka was not destined to be an end in itself; he was to become a player on a far larger stage.

Growing up in a world shared with the Native American Lakota people wherever he lived, over his lifetime Earl developed

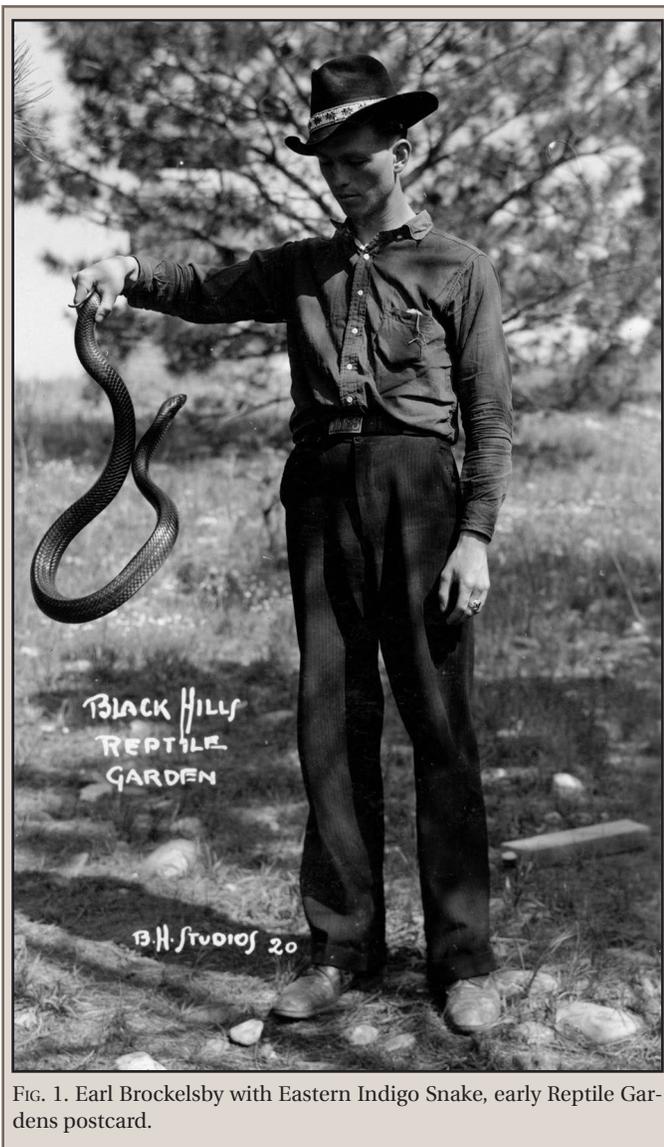


FIG. 1. Earl Brockelsby with Eastern Indigo Snake, early Reptile Gardens postcard.

a strong sense of responsibility and compassion for these people who, although living a life of poverty, placed high value on family and tradition. Several were life-long friends, including Kenny Scissons, artist and preacher Godfrey Broken Rope, and the wise Francis Tomahawk, among others.

Following a family move to Spearfish, South Dakota, in 1930, Earl entered high school. It was during his high school years that he developed a fascination for snakes and kept several local specimens in boxes stashed under the porch of the family home to show to the curious. Ultimately, Earl's mother reached the limits of her patience and exterminated the lot.

After graduating from High School in 1934, Earl attended the South Dakota School of Mines in Rapid City, located in the heart of one of the world's premier mineral- and fossil-rich regions. Thanks to his father's financial success he could attend school but he found that his interests in minerals was more aesthetic, spiritual, and commercial than academic.

GATHERING MOMENTUM

At the conclusion of his freshman year of college, Earl went to work in the fields chopping sugar beets for 15 hours a day. Within

a couple of weeks, Depression or not, Earl left and went to work as a guide at "Hidden City," showing tourists a peculiar and unique geological formation that hinted at the possibility of being man-made. Although the owner could barely pay wages, Earl found himself becoming keenly interested in lecturing to tourists and answering their questions. Almost at once his interest in visitor psychology grew. In fact, while giving his tour, he would go so far as to place a Prairie Rattlesnake on his head, which would coil up under his hat. At the end of his spiel, Earl would raise his hat and immediately the questions would fly: "Is it alive? Won't it bite you? Aren't you afraid?" He was now on the brink of a new frontier and his fascination with tourist behavior soared.

At the end of the summer, the owner of Hidden City was unable to pay Earl for his lecturing, so Earl took a series of fossils from the gift shop as payment. He began his sophomore year at South Dakota School of Mines, pursued his studies by day and made rock art at night. He created hundreds of souvenirs, each festooned with several colorful mineral samples of the Black Hills, including petrified wood, lepidolite, rose quartz, and more. These were then pressed into the extra-white plaster that Earl would mine from the Badlands. Instead of wholesaling his pieces to other businesses, he built a log cabin near the entrance to Sitting Bull Crystal Caverns from which he sold his gifts directly to visitors.

Earl, however, had his sights set on establishing his own tourist attraction and he knew just where it should be located—at the top of Rockerville Hill, two miles south of Rapid City. Immediately outside of Rapid City, the unpaved highway US 16 immediately began its ascent into the Black Hills following a series of switchbacks to the top of the hill. From this vista, weary flatland tourists could look back from where they'd come, and were treated to a spectacular, elevated view of Rapid City, the Badlands, and the distant monotonous high plains they had just crossed. In any case, in those days most travelers needed to stop to let their over-heated cars cool down, and many families would take advantage of this forced delay to climb a nearby three-story tower for a dime, stand in the cooling breeze and gaze at the awesome view. At this site on Rockerville Hill, the "old" Gardens would ultimately command the choicest of locations in the Hills. Earl realized its potential, and he set out to get it.

A MODEST BEGINNING

Negotiating a lease from the owner of the tower in 1937, Earl began constructing a modest little building that contained a few exhibits of live, mostly local, reptiles, especially rattlesnakes. Banks were understandably wary of investing in Earl's idea, which meant that this initial project had to be parlayed across two substantial payments to move forward. Maude Wagner, his wife-to-be, diligently made the handcrafted souvenirs, while Earl and a few other friends along with his younger sister, Reta Mae, built the new reptile house. The Gardens opened for business before Memorial Day on 19 May 1937. Bumper signs, an idea invented by Earl, were made from cardboard and fastened with string to the extended bumpers of the automobiles. This strategy amounted to turning a visitor's car into a traveling mini-billboard with attention-getting, long, string-ends that fluttered wildly in the breeze. This creation, genius in its simplicity was second only to actual billboards in compelling tourists to stop and visit the Gardens. Over the years, Earl's advertising strategy mainly focused on highway billboards that extended from Wisconsin to Yellowstone along with a heavy saturation of bumper signs.



FIG. 2. Earl Brockelsby in 1945, at the time of his discharge from the United States Army.

The following year, in 1938, for added variety Earl ordered some exotic snakes that arrived by Railway Express Agency. By 1939 there were 10 employees on the payroll giving tours and selling souvenirs.

From then on, whenever an overheated auto crept to the top of the hill, it was moving slow enough for one of the Reptile Gardens guides to jump on the running board and, through the open window try to persuade the sweltering family to stop and visit the Reptile Gardens. Then the guide would point to two other employees in the distance that would be role-playing, one as an employee holding a snake and the other a tourist taking a picture. Earl was unique in the reptile attraction business. His enterprise began before World War II, following which a flurry of short-lived, reptile-oriented attractions came and went across the United States. He was a businessman first, however, but one who had a keen interest in reptiles, particularly snakes. His was a commitment not only to visitor satisfaction but also in cultivating a desire among his clients to return for repeat visits. To that end, a ticket was good for multiple visits during the season. He saw those early collections of reptiles for the new Gardens both as an end in themselves and as an attraction by which he could bring in tourists and generate a living, augmented by selling souvenirs. With the combination of sales of his crafts (his highest objective) and the admission fee for the Gardens (a companion purpose) he began making enough

money to at least pay the overhead of his new, experimental venture, and occasionally a bit more.

The marriage of Earl Brockelsby and Maude Wagner took place at the Presbyterian Church in Rapid City on 21 July 1940. They both went to work that morning, opening the Gardens at 5:00 a.m. and then driving to the site of the ceremony, which took place two hours later. After a drive through the Black Hills the couple went back to work. Maude left her job at the Penney store and went to work making rock art that was sold directly to tourists, with any surplus being wholesaled to other tourist-based businesses. After the tourist season, they managed a three-month honeymoon through the Southwest and Mexico, a favorite destination of Earl's.

MOVING AHEAD

Eventually the Brockelsbys had four children. The oldest, Judee, was born 15 in 1942 and was followed in later years by Janet, Johnny, and Jeff. By 1941, World War II was looming, causing grave uncertainty on several fronts including 26-year-old Earl's likelihood of being drafted for military service. About the same time, the Gardens hit a financial impasse as visitor traffic to the Black Hills dropped 65% due to the war effort. Earl immediately began to diversify, investing in other small businesses, including pinball machines, jukeboxes, and more.

MILITARY SERVICE IN WORLD WAR II—A MAJOR SPEED BUMP

On 17 November 1943, Earl was drafted into the United States Army. He left his enterprises in the hands of trusted young associates to operate until his return. As a man accustomed to making his own decisions, Earl detested the tightly-structured way of Army life, but he made the most of it and his style of managing people won him strong support among his fellow soldiers. He was to be an infantry scout with the 235th Forward Replacement Company of the First Army and landed a month after D-Day on Omaha Beach in northern France. Earl's unit followed the action into Saint-Lo, survived the Battle of the Bulge, and then pushed on to Germany. At one point, Earl was able to gather up precious minerals scattered among the rubble of a bombed-out museum in Germany, and then return them after the war had ended. He was discharged on 26 November 1945 having served a total of two years.

RESTART

After the war, the winter of 1946 saw Earl cleaning up the Reptile Gardens building that had been closed and neglected since his departure two years before. Gasoline rationing was now over and tourists were hitting the roads in large numbers. Bursting with promotional ideas, creating billboards, and readying the Reptile Gardens building, Earl was eager for the new wave of tourists flocking to the Black Hills. Aware of how critical location can be, visitors to the Black Hills and beyond had to pass the Reptile Gardens with its brightly colored, mineral-clad gift building, located on Earl's chosen site as they drove to Mount Rushmore.

Business began to flourish. New staff took on key positions at the growing Reptile Gardens. Earl had an uncanny ability to attract and select talented, dedicated employees, most of whom would remain on Earl's permanent staff for decades. Educating visitors was a key component of the lectures given at

that time, interwoven with entertainment to “wow” the tourists. Remembering my first visit as a youngster to the Reptile Gardens in 1950, I saw enclosures staffed with enthusiastic guides giving groups of visitors “close up” information, along with cleverly drawn explanatory cartoon placards about snake facts and myths, plus a chance to touch a Bullsnake gripped in the hands of a guide—which I did. To the dismay of my parents, it was a life-changing spark for me.

Growing with the times and taking on new challenges, Earl became Mayor of Rapid City in 1946 and joined every civic club in town. With renewed energy, he was familiarizing himself with politics and focusing on his expanding Gardens. By 1949, the Reptile Gardens had been on an exponential growth curve since the war, financially grounded through Earl’s savvy business experience and the efforts of his sister, Reta Mae, who by now had a background in bookkeeping and finance, and was keeping a keen eye on both her older brother and the business. It was becoming one of the world’s largest private reptile collections with 17 varieties of rattlesnakes, and exotic species such as Russell’s Vipers and cobras totaling over 1000 specimens in all. He acquired a 375-pound Aldabra Tortoise, “Methuselah,” that he was especially fond of. The entire Reptile Gardens building, faced with hand-made blocks of colorful Black Hills minerals, was a dazzling sight for visitors as they crested the top of the hill. Due to multiple add-ons, the original building was expanding and would ultimately become the largest gift shop in the Black Hills. Additional space was created that would become a factory for Earl’s Black Hills Novelty Company, which continued to produce rock art for other retail outlets in the region. Eventually there would be a kitchen, warehouse, offices for the staff, and lodging for the cook, plus other assorted purposes. In those days a huge water cistern needed to be kept filled to meet the Garden’s needs, sometimes requiring two or three deliveries by water truck each day. Behind the gift building and entrance, a separate large Reptile House was built, faced with circular blocks of both white and rose quartz. Downstairs were bunkrooms for aspiring reptile-minded guides who came to work from around the globe.

Earl had an astute gift for artistry, which he combined with his building and exhibit designs. In the 1940s, Earl and his crew began creating bricks for the large gift building, adorned with seven kinds of colorful Black Hills minerals such as quartz, lepidolite, zebra sandstone, petrified wood, chrysocolla, and more, all set in pure white Badlands plaster. Once completed, a large, neon image of a rattlesnake alternately coiled and then struck across the entire length of the building, visible at night from as far away as Sheep Table in the Badlands over 30 miles away. He commissioned the Lakota/Crow artist, Godfrey Broken Rope, to design his letterhead consisting of a stylized snake for each letter. He recycled discarded railroad ties by cutting them into finished “squares,” their attractive wood grain streaked with jet-black, aged creosote to make very attractive, heavy-duty display stands for exhibits. Cleaned skeletons of snakes and lizards, some painted black, graced the walls of the large entrance hall. He tastefully implemented the use of minerals consisting of large specimen pieces (such as bright green malachite or quartz crystals) and the small, tumbled stones (including gleaming pyrite) to set off his reptile enclosures, a practice in use to this day.

ATOP A GROWING GIANT

With the new Reptile House coming on line, Earl and Maude traveled to New York City. On this combination business and vacation trip they visited the New York Zoological Society’s Bronx

Zoo. Earl was very concerned about their large Aldabra Tortoise, which had developed chronic diarrhea and watery eyes. He needed to speak to a specialist. They met with Earl Chace, a reptile/amphibian keeper whose responsibilities included the care of the zoo’s giant tortoises. Chace also had a strong background in entomology and was a public lecturer. Brockelsby explained to Chace everything that they were doing to provide conscientious care for the tortoise, including sterilizing the feed pans and meticulously cleaning the food beforehand. Brockelsby was astonished when Chace told him that they were keeping the tortoise too clean! “Stir a handful of dirt into his food” was Chace’s admonishment. When Brockelsby returned to the Reptile Gardens, Chace’s corrective measures were quickly implemented. The tortoise began to regain lost weight and the diarrhea disappeared.

Since Earl Brockelsby was actively looking for a curator to care for the collection, it was no surprise that shortly thereafter Earl Chace was asked to come to work for the Reptile Gardens. Moreover, Chace came with additional capabilities—as a professional herpetologist his lecture style had high public appeal that Brockelsby also needed. Before working at the Bronx Zoo, Chace had worked for the “Insect Zoo” in Rhode Island, where he developed his lecture style under the tutelage of Director/Owner Brayton Eddy, an entomologist. Soon, as an accomplished lecturer, Earl Chace became the favored “stand in” when needed, for Eddy and later, on behalf of his boss, Raymond Ditmars (herpetologist, Bronx Zoo). Chace substantially upgraded the content and delivery of the talks given by Reptile Gardens guides to the public. In later years, Chace extended his efforts beyond his midwestern audience by authoring animal-based fact books for children and newspaper articles including his nature-based column (“It Comes Nature-ally”) for the *Rapid City Journal*. After his retirement, Chace went on to give snakebite first-aid programs to EMTs in a three-state area. Earl contributed enormously to the herpetological image that the Gardens needed both in terms of upgrading the care of the living collection and heightening public education presentations.

Although Earl Brockelsby was a good teacher for the public, he was most effective in his role as “Education Director.” This characteristic was a Brockelsby strength—recognizing exceptional talent when he saw it. Consequently, and as with the rest of his talented staff, he gave broad operational latitude to Earl Chace. Chace was able to elevate the science of educating the public to an inimitable art form, a hallmark of the Gardens during Chace’s tenure.

Earl Brockelsby fostered loans and exchanges of reptiles and amphibians, and encouraged breeding efforts for the betterment of captive populations. One of two Chinese Alligators that I had acquired in the late 1950s from the Zoobjedinenije in Moscow (which had probably acquired them from a propagation site in Anhui Province of the People’s Republic of China) was loaned to the Gardens. This animal survived the disastrous Dome Fire of 1976 and was later placed with the Bronx Zoo’s Chinese Alligator breeding group as a founder animal in Louisiana. Many species of reptiles, mainly venomous snakes, have been born or hatched at the Gardens over the years and exchanged with other zoos. As the staff developed their proficiencies, the Reptile Gardens grew as a favorite tourist destination, ranking second only to Mount Rushmore in popularity in the Black Hills for some decades after the war.



FIG. 3. Postcard of Earl milking a rattlesnake, circa 1960.

PERSONAL RECOLLECTIONS

It was in 1951, at age 15 that I read a syndicated article in the local *Bay City Times* (Michigan) about the Reptile Gardens along with comments by Dr. Hobart Smith, the internationally famous herpetologist from the University of Illinois, praising the Black Hills facility. Having visited the BHRG two years before, I immediately sent a letter inquiring about the care of a Bullsake I had recently purchased and, by the way, asked if there might be a job possibility. To my astonishment, Earl Chace, by now the new Curator of Reptiles, asked me to send an application and shortly thereafter hired me. I began my career as a lecturer and assistant curator at age 16, in the summer of 1952 at the Reptile Gardens.

My duties consisted of lecturing to the public for four days a week, doing keeper work two days and, at Chace's insistence, I needed to take that seventh day off. Six of us lived in the Reptile House lower level in one of two bunkrooms. One of my roommates, Brian Burrage, was a fellow teenager from England who would one day obtain his PhD in herpetology from the University in South Africa.

The Reptile Gardens opened at 7:00 a.m. and stopped selling tickets at 9 p.m. (doors normally closed at 10:30 p.m.) and hosted 300–500 visitors per day. The Pacific Theater of World War II had been over for seven years, General Eisenhower was now the American President and the Distant Early Warning Line (or DEW Line—a system of radar stations) had not yet been built. Instead, huge six-engine B-36 Peacemakers were taking off from the nearby Ellsworth Air Force Base, roaring over the Gardens in their ascent as they would embark on their global patrols. From our Rockerville lookout, we could look down on those

huge planes as they lifted off their mile-long runways and came lumbering toward us, all engines roaring, slowly gaining altitude. The alligators would begin bellowing as the planes thundered overhead, sometimes low enough that we could see the seams in the gleaming fuselages.

At that time, the Reptile Gardens was becoming a leader in educating the general public about reptiles, their natural history, first aid for snakebite, and countering myths with demonstrations of anatomy and physiology utilizing living specimens. Our lecture content capitalized on a blend of education and entertainment strategies outlined by both Brockelsby and Chace with the goal of holding every visitor's rapt attention. For example, any length or weight measurements we cited also included a reference that could be mentally visualized (i.e., a 16-foot python was described as being the length of an average Chevrolet, etc.). At that time there was no alligator wrestling or venomous snake "milking" simply because high visitor attendance did not require these risky tactics.

Exceptional exhibit specimens included a particularly large Greater Indian Rat Snake (*Ptyas mucosa*) that was especially active as it looped back and forth, sometimes for an hour or more over a large elk antler shed. "Methuselah" was a crowd-pleaser especially when the large Aldabra Tortoise walked to its outdoor yard in the morning and then back at night. If a storm descended during the day, the gigantic animal would "bulldoze" through and over its corral fence as it hastened to get back into the Reptile House. A group of a dozen adult Green Iguanas would "rain down" from their tree branches overhead and come racing toward a keeper approaching their large enclosure with a tray of peeled bananas. The list went on. In all, the Reptile Gardens exhibited one of the largest assemblages of living reptiles and amphibians in any zoo, displaying particularly attractive specimens in beautifully furnished exhibits. All of the reptiles, their keepers, and the lecturers were expertly managed under the careful, experienced eye of Earl Chace. It was a dream herpetological collection in a unique facility staffed with exceptional managers and patronized by a broad swath of eager tourists that came from every U.S. state. It was also a unique, ideal environment for the inner growth of any teenager.

With all of the exceptional, enthusiastic mentors available to me at the Gardens—Brockelsby, Chace, Maierhauser, Jim Campbell, Weston, and others, this beginning to my zoo herpetology passion was a whirlwind drop-kick that propelled me far along toward my career. To this day 65 years later, I benefit from an occasional recollection of some timeless advice given to me by Earl Brockelsby, Earl Chace, and others from that period.

COPING WITH SUCCESS AND MOVING AHEAD

In the late 1950s, in partnership with the California Alligator Farm, Earl invested heavily in an effort by Arthur Jones to collect some huge Nile Crocodiles (*Crocodylus niloticus*) for the two institutions. Although the venture was an enormous financial headache (Earl estimated that he could have purchased six brand new Cadillacs for the amount he sent to Jones in Africa), of the few crocodiles that arrived to the Gardens, there was one huge male that became a legend in its own right and lived to thrill visitors for many years.

Some new giant Aldabra and Galapagos tortoises arrived along with several other shipments. However, from time to time a foreign dealer would commit an error such as the year when the Gardens received hundreds of cobras in poor condition instead of two or three large Water Monitors as ordered.



FIG. 4. Highland Sing-sing, Papua, New Guinea, late 1960s.

As his success with the Reptile Gardens grew, some selected peripheral business ventures grew as well. One of his favorite challenges was the commodities market in which he became a shrewd investor. At the end of the day, he needed to have more wins than losses, an ultimate goal. In several respects Earl's investments could be unique, such as the necessity to keep the tropical dome heated during the winter. Heating oil was needed—lots of it. Depending on the market, Earl would purchase hundreds of gallons in a win-win strategy of either cashing out if his investment turned a profit or take delivery of the heating oil if costs fell. Some of his investments were less than popular if they spilled onto the Reptile Gardens crew such as the time he accepted delivery on a huge number of chickens that had to be killed, plucked, processed, and frozen. Some of these ventures were never repeated.

FAIRYLAND

During the heat of financial growth curves in the Black Hills, one of Earl's 1950s investments was the construction of a new zoo concept near Custer—Fairyland Zoo. It was essentially a Children's Zoo, which capitalized on Earl's early realization that it was not the father who controlled the tourist family's pocket book; it was the mother. Accordingly, Earl reasoned that the children were apt to be more successful in persuading their mother to visit a facility than father. Consequently, Earl's advertising campaigns were aimed at children and mothers.

In Jim Campbell, Earl had a man who loved animals from a behavioral perspective and fully subscribed to Earl's entrepreneurial methods. Jim was a remarkable manager who worked closely with Keller and Marian Breland and later Bob Bailey of the I.Q. Zoo in Hot Springs, Arkansas. Together they developed domestic animal acts and storylines for his Bewitched Village performances, a business venture purchased from Knott's Berry Farm in California. Quite likely its failure with Knott's and high degree of success at Fairyland was based on Jim Campbell's remarkable patience and talents to train the animals for their sometimes-complex tasks. As Jim would say, "People may see a chicken as a meal or an egg-laying factory, but for me that bird is worth hundreds of dollars as a trained performer in the Village

and will be treated like royalty." For one remarkable summer in 1956, I had the unique opportunity of managing Fairyland's collection and could compare, first hand, Earl's calculations on visitor behavior with actual results. Although Fairyland Zoo was successful, its location on the western side of the Hills did not attract an exceptionally large number of visitors. After several years, when the new Reptile Gardens opened in Spring Creek Valley, Fairyland Zoo was closed and the large Bewitched Village enterprise was relocated to the new Gardens.

METAMORPHOSIS

Enormous change was coming and along with it another event of legendary proportions. Earl and I kept in touch during this very trying period of adjustment regarding the planned realignment of US Highway 16. The Reptile Gardens obviously needed to be located next to the highway since it was a roadside attraction. However, plans for the new highway called for the route to bypass the Reptile Gardens by a quarter of a mile, which could doom Earl's enterprise. In spite of his repeated appeals for an exit at the Gardens, the highway planning board would not budge. Ultimately, for about five years Earl was compelled to match wits with the highway department that wanted to redo US 16 and bypass the Gardens. Ultimately, he knew he could not win but he would give this his best shot.

As Earl related to me, because South Dakota did not have appropriate property condemnation laws on their books, Earl bought up the rights to raw land that the highway would need in order to continue. Earl said he would give the highway planners the property if they would give him a spur. They smirked and figured they would just condemn all of that property. But that could not happen. As Earl put it: "South Dakota was one of the few states that had no condemnation laws!" Earl even contributed to the elections of both candidates for Governor with his only request—don't sign a condemnation bill. Anticipating the time when he would need to move the Gardens, the Reptile Gardens budget was trimmed ruthlessly to the point that his managers were looking forward with anticipation to the day/year when they would finally move and begin to breathe, budgetarily, once again. Earl brought the highway project to a stand-still for five years.

FROM THE TOP OF THE HILL TO THE VALLEY

Meanwhile, Earl found and purchased property in Spring Creek Valley a few miles south of the Gardens. It was the same property that was once considered for a new United Nations building before it was sited in New York City. Whereas the existing Gardens was located high on a hill, the new Gardens would be visible to approaching visitors from a mile away as they descended into Spring Creek Valley. It would be a traffic stopper.

However, more than just making a move, Earl was looking for something unique in the zoo world, a totally new visitor experience for the new Reptile Gardens that he was planning. His sense of what the public wanted was based on his own brand of continual research into that slowly moving target: tourist behavior and its evolution. His insights were being perpetually honed with his keen interest in psychology and philosophy coupled with revenues generated both at the gate (visitor anticipation) and through the sales of merchandise when the tourists exited (visitor satisfaction). As a young employee, I benefited enormously from his guidance, which strongly

influenced my future role in managing living collections for visitor satisfaction, particularly those herpetological, starting first at my own small reptile zoo near St. Ignace, Michigan, then Lincoln Park Zoo and on to Brookfield as well as consulting assignments for other zoos.

It was therefore a surprise and a keen honor when Earl asked my opinion as to whether I had any suggestions about a new concept that he could implement that would be unique and compelling for visitors. Knowing that Earl already would have several ideas of his own, I was going to give his request my best shot. What I had learned from Earl years ago would now be looping back, partnering with him in the form of a new concept that he would critically examine in detail. I sent him a sketch with notes about a concept that had never been tried, which called for combining reptiles plus some mammals and birds with visitors, all sharing the same space.

To concentrate on the entire project, Earl went into a kind of exile, free of distractions to apply his talents and business sense to this new challenge. His considerations were many and some called for fine-tuning based on what had worked before. For example, the old Gardens was not visible to visitors until their vehicle reached the top of the Rockerville Hill. Spring Creek Valley, on the other hand, was a reverse opportunity; visitors would see the new Gardens at a distance as they began their descent. He had to grab the travelers' attention and hold it for several seconds, long enough to steer them off the highway and into the parking lot.

The center-piece, Earl decided, would be the creation of a large dome, 110 feet in diameter, stocked with a profusion of tropical plants, populated with a wide variety of reptiles and other creatures, with visitors invited to participate in the mix. It would be like immersing them in their own personal tropical documentary. From the highway, and in one smooth continuum, Earl's intent was to capture the visitor's gaze as they descend to the valley floor, seizing their imaginations on the way in order to urge them into the parking lot. Once inside the dome there would be a wondrous jungle inhabited with many kinds of life forms without barriers.

Visitor emotions ran high, ranging from surprise to reassurance, challenging them as they embarked on self-guided tours. In fact, for the first few years, Earl had guides available to accompany visitors or at least monitor the crowds until he was confident of the behavior of both the visitors and the animals. Since that time this conceptual prototype has been widely imitated in various ways in other zoos, although few provide a barrier-less venue for a mix of both visitors and the other living creatures. On a larger level, it should be noted that typically it is the private institutions that take the challenge of implementing something new. If and when it works imitations will proliferate among municipal and non-profit zoos, some at the cost of millions of dollars.

The large crocodilian enclosures would be at ground level, placed around the circumference of the dome with indoor and outdoor viewing. Giant tortoises, on the other hand, would have a building of their own. A large array of live reptile exhibits would be located on a second-floor mezzanine, many of them upgraded and transferred from the old Gardens. Amid plantings, there would be skeletal, large fossils, and other attractive exhibits. The same translucent exterior of the dome would provide for the needs of the array of plants and trees in the tropical forest and the profusion of greenery on the mezzanine. Visitors would not only enjoy an exploratory walk through the "jungle" at ground

level, but also observe others by looking down from the railing of the circular elevated overlook.

Ahead of his time, Earl wanted to be a producer rather than a consumer of rattlesnakes. A large walk-through rattlesnake den was created for both visitor experience and education, as well as maintaining Prairie Rattlesnakes through the cold months. This installation was removed a few years later due to a lack of understanding about rattlesnake management during the hibernation period.

There was a prairie dog exhibit, popular with the public but highly unpopular with area ranchers. The ranchers predicted (correctly) that these little nuisances would soon escape. As Earl Chace later wrote to me: "—and the ranchers grinned with glee as they shot them all to hell."

In 1964 the Reptile Gardens moved and in June of 1965 the new Gardens opened to the public. Chaos was minimal while high hopes and excitement prevailed. After that first year of overcoming unexpected obstacles and establishing an operational baseline, improved efficiency and fine-tuning would further streamline the new operations.

A NEW START—AGAIN!

Then disaster. It was eight years later, in 1976, that an electrical short was responsible for igniting a fast-spreading fire that completely demolished the dome. Most of the reptiles died in the inferno. It was seen as far as the Badlands, 30 miles away where Earl was hiking. On his return, the scene was one of complete, total destruction. The dome, one of the biggest anywhere at that time, was a charred, melted and collapsed ruin. As Earl surveyed the devastation he told everyone in the small, demoralized group that "We need to get busy; we are going to rebuild." Remarkably, the Gardens did not close. Admissions were slashed but amidst the cleanup it was business as before.

Meanwhile, advances in the world of construction technology had been progressing at an almost exponential pace during the previous eight years. Earl was able to purchase a completely new, much more attractive dome that provided the plants with improved lighting and presented a far superior architectural statement for visitors as they descended into the valley.

STAYING THE COURSE

Running the Gardens was much more than dealing with internal operations as Earl, with staff advice, piloted the newly restored facility to continued prosperity through the years. In addition to running the broad assortment of internal components of the Gardens there were the myriad of external needs that were equally important. For example, as part of his advertising program he needed to keep his array of billboards, over 800 miles of them, between Wyoming to the west and Wisconsin in the east, in top condition. And Earl, with the help of his highly capable and motivated staff, would be a perpetual master of the devilish details and challenges throughout. Eventually, when it was clear to Earl that he needed someone to step in and take over, it was his nephew, Joe Maierhauser, who was up to the task. And Joe has been there, at the helm ever since.

LEGACY

Earl did not leave a herpetological bibliography for succeeding generations of scientists, but some of his exceptionally talented

employees have. Both Charles “Chuck” Peterson, Ph.D. at Idaho State University and Jon Oldham (Earl’s son-in-law) worked for several years at the Reptile Gardens and both elevated their careers with advanced academic degrees in herpetology. Chuck investigated temperature-driven herp behavior and Oldham went to Boulder to study under Hobart Smith and eventually write reptile laboratory dissection guides. Earl Chace gave lectures on first-aid for snakebite to EMT groups across a three-state area. On behalf of the Gardens and through his lecturing strategies, Chace quite likely educated more people about reptiles throughout the Upper Midwest than any other single enterprise excepting TV documentaries.

Legions of youngsters, now adults and some into old age, worked for Earl at the Reptile Gardens over the decades, their lives broadened for the experience. Arguably his biggest contribution was—and is—the education (with some attention-grabbing entertainment thrown in) of millions of midwesterners and others from around the globe, heightening their appreciation of the natural world and the vast assortment of animals in it—primarily by using reptiles and amphibians as the entre.

The inertia of Earl Brockelsby’s long range and meticulous planning for the new Gardens in the 1970s set in motion an

enterprise that continues to be vibrant, and is as attractive to visitors today as it was almost 50 years ago. His remarkable understanding of the tourist mind-set, along with their inevitable cultural shifts over time, continues to hold its visitors spell-bound and even offer tranquil escape options as they immerse either into an exciting tropical dome of animal activity or seek refuge in a peaceful outdoor setting. The Reptile Gardens continues to be an endless opportunity for entertainment and education experiences that span across generations of repeat visitors.

Earl Brockelsby died in Rapid City on 11 August 1993.

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Art in Herpetology

As space and available material permit, we will occasionally publish examples of historical as well as contemporary herpetological art. We welcome the submission of historical material under the following conditions:

- The work should be copyright-free and be provided as a high-resolution digitized file (consult Herpetological Art and Illustration Coordinator or Editor for specifications).
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Material may be submitted for review to Jackson Shedd, Herpetological Art and Illustration Coordinator at jackson_shedd@sbcglobal.net.