

Zoo to You column for Garden City Telegram

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Topic: Ninety years of zoo progress.

Lee Richardson Zoo turns 90 this year. Coincidentally, my mother also turns 90 this year. In that time they've both seen a lot of changes. In 1927 Lee Richardson Zoo started as the Garden City Zoo with a pair of skunks, and now we provide top quality care for over 250 animals from around the world. Sliced bread, which was first packaged and sold in 1928, now comes in so many varieties it can cover a wall of the grocery all by itself. Of course, that's not all that's changed in 90 years.

1930s

Sock monkeys, finger paints, and molded green army soldiers were popular toys in the 1930s. I guess that's something that hasn't really changed all that much though. Chinese checkers and knock-knock jokes were fads of the 1930s. This was also the time of prohibition, the Great Depression, and the dust bowl, when drought and dust storms swept through the Great Plains. Miniature golf, dance marathons, playing marbles or jacks were all popular pastimes. These have been replaced in popularity over the years of course, with people now spending their time on binge watching, Youtube videos, and Facebook.

1940s

In the 40's the Garden City Zoo received two polar bears as a gift from Stanolind Oil Company. Around that same time, shortly after WWII, DDT was viewed as the answer to mosquitoes and other insect problems. Only later did we find out it played a major role in the decline of the bald eagle. But thanks to a coordinated effort, the bald eagle has recovered from the edge of extinction.

1950s

Gelatin molds, coonskin caps, and drive-in movies were the rage of the 1950s. The Garden City Zoo was renamed the Lee Richardson Zoo in honor of the past zoo director/police chief's many years of dedication to the zoo. The zoo received its first elephant as a donation from Cheyenne Mountain Zoo in Colorado Springs, and the Hospitality House was built and opened for business. Gunsmoke, set in Dodge City, Kansas, debuted on television in 1955.

1960s

The 60s were the time of smiley faces, mood rings, banana seats, and superballs. In 1961 the zoo acquired "Tela" the hippo who was donated by the Garden City Telegram. Mutual of Omaha's Wild Kingdom debuted on television in 1963. 1965 was the year of the major flood that inundated most of the zoo. Sadly some animals were lost, but thankfully many were rescued by staff and community members.

1970s

The first Earth Day was held in 1970 as a day to focus national attention on the issues facing the environment. The last Ed Sullivan show aired in 1971. The zoo saw the addition of a perimeter fence in 1977 to deter vandalism and keep dogs out of the zoo. The microwave oven, which was invented in 1946, was small enough and inexpensive enough by this time, that it was becoming a popular kitchen item.

1980s

In 1982 Monkey Island was replaced with a more modern primate exhibit. That exhibit has now become outdated, and Friends of Lee Richardson Zoo are currently raising funds for the next evolution of primate habitats at Lee Richardson Zoo, improving the guest experience, staff experience, and the well-being of the primates that live in it. In 1986 the zoo was accredited by the Association of Zoos and Aquariums for the first time (and we've maintained the high standards ever since). The Rubiks Cube, Cabbage Patch Kids, and video games became part of our lives.

1990s

Beanie Babies ruled along with boy bands and fanny packs. At the zoo, the first "Boo! at the Zoo" was a terrific success. Finnup Center for Conservation Education (thanks in no small part to the support of the Finnup Foundation) and Wild Asia exhibit opened to the community. The zoo started offering Distance Learning programs. Harry Potter novels hit the bookstores.

2000s

The Friends of Lee Richardson Zoo organized the first "A Wild Affair" to raise funds to help with improvements to the zoo. Kansas Waters and the Asiatic black bear exhibit (now sloth bear) were new additions to Lee Richardson Zoo. Red ruffed lemurs and an anteater moved in at Lee Richardson Zoo for the first time. The first of three community-based theatrical productions was put on to raise funds for

zoo improvements. Energy drinks and fantasy leagues along with mp3 players and speed dating became popular.

2010s

So far this decade is highlighted by Angry Birds and food trucks, Walking Dead and Downton Abbey, and of course, the KC Royals winning the World Series. At the zoo, Cat Canyon opened offering larger, more naturalistic habitats for the cats and an improved experience for zoo guests. Goeldi's monkeys, pygmy lorises, and red pandas were born at Lee Richardson Zoo for the first time, and the African spurred tortoises were given a home all their own.

For the decades of support, we at Lee Richardson Zoo thank the community, FOLRZ, and the City of Garden City. To help celebrate our 90th birthday, please be sure to visit us, especially during the week of May 14-20, when we will have a variety of events ranging from recognizing Mother's Day, Blues at the Zoo, Endangered Species Day, and other festivities. More details on these events will be available in the near future.