

Ochsner Park Zoo began in 1926

Tales of Earlier Days

By Bob Dewel

It has always seemed a little ominous, the nineteenth century brick house standing lonely astride a hill in Baraboo's Ochsner Park. Shrouded by trees and bushes, it helps to wall off a wolf habitat on the east. To the south of the aging house of some note, it backs up to a small zoo.

A wolf habitat in town? A zoo? In Baraboo? You'd expect a zoo only in larger cities, but in Baraboo? In fact, most of Wisconsin's registered zoos are found in cities such as Milwaukee, Madison, Green Bay, and Racine. All have traditional zoos, with a varying assortment of creatures—but so does the City of Baraboo!

There is a Wikipedia definition of zoos, namely places where as few as only one or two species are kept. By that definition, The International Crane Foundation is listed on the internet as another zoo in the Baraboo area. If you go out a little farther, there is the Wisconsin Big Cat Rescue in Rock Springs, with lions and tigers. By a similar definition, the Circus World also maintains a zoo of sorts for three months each summer. That's four "zoos" in our area!

The fact is, however, that the local zoo maintains a supporting membership and adheres to the rules and regulations of the USDA, thus qualifying it to be listed officially as a Wisconsin zoo. The board of directors, namely the Parks and Recreation Commission, supervises the operation in close cooperation with FOZ, the "Friends of the Zoo".

This is a volunteer organization currently headed by Kandy Beckwith and famed for its annual Zoo Crew Pizza Day in cooperation with the folks at Pizza Hut. City funding is modest considering the size and scope of the zoo. Private donations and bequests have been generous in the past also

The zoo had its modest beginning began sometime around 1926, for an old color postcard shows two of what seem like makeshift pens perched on the lawn near the Northeast corner of Ochsner Park. One housed a bear. There was a zoo commission, headed by such well-known Baraboo names as Frank Herfort, F.E. Morey, Herman Grotophorst, R.E. Schultz, and William Powers. Grotophorst had already gifted the park with a band shell, still standing in 2013.

A 1953 News-Republic article stated that by then the park boasted 5 deer, five black bears, plus goats, a badger, a raccoon, and a deodorized skunk. In addition there were rabbits, guinea pigs, Canadian Geese, and a variety of more common farmyard denizens. Longtime Superintendent Clifford Campbell announced there soon there would be monkeys to replace the death of a fourteen year monkey resident.

The zoo was started in 1924 by Clifford Campbell, and he served until sometime after 1953. Today its management is in the capable hands of Alice Schellenberger, with additional

help during the summer months. The bears now reside in greatly enhanced quarters. Also in the zoo are two each of wolfs, Llamas, and monkeys plus lynx, bobcat, deer, and many other species. Especially enjoyable are the burrowing rodents.

So what about the mysterious and historical house looming over all of this, as mentioned in the first paragraph? It has its own history and article, which will follow in a week or so. Meantime, visit this small and intimate zoo, a facility usually reserved for larger cities!

This early photo shows a bear in a cage on the Northeast corner of the property



Sauk County Historical Society