Lakewood Farm: The Private Zoo That the Public Loved

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LAKewood FARM:

By Geoffrey Reynolds
It was 1878 when George Fulmer Getz, a penniless but ambitious farm boy from Mechanicsburg, Pennsylvania, traveled to Chicago to seek his fortune. His business skills and daring enabled him to rise rapidly from the position of messenger boy for the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad to owner of the Globe Corporation—the largest wholesale coal supplier in the Midwest—in just 23 years. A merchant who mingled with American presidents and industrial tycoons,

THE PRIVATE ZOO THAT THE PUBLIC LOVED

For 18 years, a Chicago coal merchant and collector of exotic animals invited the public to view his private menagerie, located on the grounds of his lakeside estate north of Holland.

PEOPLE CAME IN DROVES.

Opposite page, above: George Getz, entrepreneur and animal lover.
Below: George Getz Jr. rides Nancy the elephant into Lakewood Farm.
Right: An advertisement for the zoo.
Images courtesy of Geoffrey Reynolds.

For 18 years, a Chicago coal merchant and collector of exotic animals invited the public to view his private menagerie, located on the grounds of his lakeside estate north of Holland.

Sports celebrities and stars of the entertainment world, Getz was equally at ease in the company of common men and women.

Getz first came to Michigan in 1910, to find property on which to build a country home for his wife Susan and their growing family. The couple looked at a piece of land on Holland’s north side, on the shore of Lake Michigan. Somehow Susan Getz saw in the 70 acres, made impassable by thick undergrowth and trees, a future retreat complete with stables, vegetable gardens, fruit orchards, and broad fields for their children to play in. Unfortunately, she passed away that summer while giving birth to their second son, and never got to see her husband’s creation: a great estate that he called Lakewood Farm.

In 1913, Getz expanded the estate when he purchased an additional 64 acres from Hyo Bos and Abraham Peters. Later, he gained even more land from Gerrit Kooyers, bringing the total to 253 acres. Much of it was landscaped with fruit trees and floral displays and dotted with buildings housing his growing livestock collection.

The collection began with poultry that was exhibited at fairs and expositions in Holland. It was at these local events that he also began to exhibit larger and more exotic animals that he’d collected: Toulouse geese, pheasants, a sun bear from Japan, monkeys from Madagascar, camels and stallions from Arabia, donkeys from Israel, dogs from Europe, raccoons,
black bears, and dog-faced baboons. The planned addition of an elephant to the collection that year failed when the elephant died on the ship during transport. Other animals were acquired from a touring sideshow, including a red fox, an eagle, two wildcats, a leopard, a badger, two coyotes, and five monkeys.

What made Getz want to collect exotic animals to begin with? One story said that his interest was sparked when he received a monkey as a gift. But a 1926 newspaper interview revealed a more prosaic purpose. In it, he talked about his impoverished childhood in rural Pennsylvania and the impression that circus posters depicting tigers and elephants made on him as a young boy. “What are those?” asked Getz about the animals. “I’ll get some like that to play with,” was his response when told what they were.

As his menagerie grew, Getz began to host large gatherings at Lakewood Farm for his friends and influential associates from around the nation. Eventually, this generosity was extended to local Hollanders during Fourth of July celebrations.

While Lakewood Farm was seen as a fascinating place to visit with an invitation, it wasn’t until 1915 that Getz extended an open invitation to the public to come and see his farm and zoo for free.

Getz continued to develop Lakewood Farm into a commercial, moneymaking operation that hatched 18,000 White Leghorn and Wyandotte chicks every three weeks. This volume of production led him to build more buildings to house staff members, like a men’s dormitory that included a reading room, pool room, and bowling alley. He also furnished at least six individual houses for married men on staff and their families. Harold Streur, a former gardener, remembered earning from $35 to $50 a month with just one day off every two weeks when Getz sent them into Holland on a truck. Every other Sunday, they fed and watered the animals to give the keepers a day off. He also recalled planting flowers for weeks at a time in the four summers he worked on the farm as a teenager. The soil was nothing but sand, Streur said, but they grew everything with fertilizer and a plentiful supply of Lake Michigan water.

As the commercial part of Lakewood Farm continued to grow, so did the exotic animal collection. By 1916, Getz had added a long-armed baboon, rhesus monkeys, Pekin ducks, lemurs and ring-tailed monkeys, odorless skunks, Java monkeys, Rocky Mountain goats, an anteater, an ocelot, white rats, prairie dogs, a beaver, and two bald eagles. Then, the following year, Getz gave most of his menagerie away to conserve needed supplies and staff for the war effort that America was close to entering. The larger animals were given to the Lincoln Park Zoo in Chicago and the smaller to John Ball Zoo in nearby Grand Rapids.

As Getz reduced the size of his zoo, he increased the amount of his financial support for the American Red Cross and war bond drives. But making and giving money away to the war effort was not enough. In November 1918,
the 54-year-old Getz enlisted in the Red Cross and was appointed head of the Belgium zone with the rank of major. He returned to Chicago in February 1919 to resume running the Globe Corporation.

By 1922, Getz was back to socializing on a grand scale with over 5,500 Hollanders, including every merchant and veteran in Holland, at his well-known Fourth of July party.

In 1925, Getz and his two sons embarked on a round-the-world cruise. When they returned in April 1926, they brought back a young orangutan. Other animals they had purchased were delivered over a period of time, and included Nancy the elephant, 29 monkeys, two tapirs, two 28-foot pythons, kangaroos, a lion, bears, a jaguar, two tigers, two black panthers, two leopards, and a second orangutan. Getz's representatives were in place along the travel route to Upper: The Getz home was a showplace on the Lake Michigan shore, and later owned by members of the Vandenbergs family.

Lower: Two of six lion cubs known to have been born at the zoo rest in the shade of their cage.
care for and forward the animals to their next stop. The redevelopment of the zoo at Lakewood Farm was underway.

In July 1926, Getz threw a party for Michigan gubernatorial candidate Fred Green to which much of west Michigan was invited. More than 30,000 people were fed and treated to tours of the farm’s zoo at that event.

Ultimately, an estimated 800,000 visitors passed through the gates that season.

In 1927, the zoo grew again and more animals, like Big Bill the American bison, were added. Getz also took a two-month African continent tour with his son George and a few corporate friends. During his absence, staff members remodeled the gardens and enlarged the zoo. The changes included a new central heating plant for the farm, a coal house, a monkey house, and new cages and houses for the animals yet to come.

In 1930, a waterfowl lagoon—equipped with fountains and a small bridge and island—was added for the resident ducks, wild geese, and white and black swans.

Getz’s collection of animals eventually grew to include 141 mammals, 201 birds, and 15

Upper: Visitors were permitted close contact with the animals.
Middle: Cart races were conducted on the grounds.
Lower: Getz (kneeling in front) posed with his children and a cadre of keepers.
Opposite page, left: Keepers grew close to their charges; when the zoo closed and the animals were donated to the Brookfield Zoo, four of the men were sent along to ease the transition.
Right: A miniature horse and Nancy the elephant served as greeters for visitors coming in the gate.
reptiles. Many of the animals acquired—such as Sally the chimpanzee—came with unusual histories. Sally was purchased from the Ziegfeld Follies for $2,000 in 1928, after she had bit the leg of a small girl during a show. At Getz's zoo, she entertained park visitors with her daily roller skating exploits, fed herself with silverware, and rode a tricycle. In later years, while at the Brookfield Zoo, she gave birth to its first baby chimpanzee and enjoyed other domestic activities like sweeping up her own cage with a lit cigarette in her mouth.

Nancy the 4-ton elephant came to the zoo in 1926, and was named by local photographer Arthur Sas in a contest that netted him $5. That same year, Wilma Por gave Toodles the rhinoceros its name.

Ri-Ri the lion was born on the farm, along with another cub, in March 1932. Because their mother rejected them, they were taken to Chicago to be raised by Dr. A.R. Metz, a friend of Getz, in a hospital. The second cub died en route, but Ri-Ri survived and was taken back to Lakewood Farm in June, weighing 10 pounds. Four other Lakewood lions, born in July of that year, were raised by a spaniel named Daisy while a farm cat nursed the dog's new litter of puppies.

Some of the animals posed a challenge for their keepers. Harold Streur said in a 1998 interview, "I remember [the] python because I was one of 15 people who had to move it in the spring and fall. It spent the winters in a heated building. The animal handler would put the head in there fast and shut the door quick."

During the autumn of 1931, Getz was interviewed by the Michigan Tradesman about his life. In the interview, he remarked that he had offered to sell Lakewood Farm to the state of Michigan for $625,000 payable over 20 years, but it had declined. He also mentioned that he would start charging a fee to visit Lakewood Farm in 1932: 25 cents for adults and 10 cents for children. This was the first time that any visitor was asked to pay for admission. The reason given by Getz was the need to offset the cost of caring for the animals and paying staff members. This change in policy might have also been his way of showing state officials that the zoo could be operated economically. Admissions on the first weekend of 1932 raised $1,800.

The final blow to the zoo came on July 23, 1933, when a violent storm ripped through the area, causing $15,000 in damage to buildings but leaving the animals unharmed. Not long after the damage was assessed, Getz began negotiating with the Chicago Zoological Foundation to place his animals in the planned Brookfield Zoo that was due to open in mid-1934. The foundation, like the state of Michigan, could not afford the price he was asking, and declined his offer.

Though still drawing crowds from across the U.S., South America, and Europe, Getz decided to close the zoo for good at the end of the 1933 season. This Michigan treasure, which had entertained thousands of visitors since World War I, was costing him too much money—a reported $75,000 to $100,000 per year—to operate.

In November, the animals were transported by truck, under George Getz Jr.'s supervision, to the Brookfield Zoo. Ri-Ri the lion had to be calmed with ether during the
move and Nancy the elephant traveled in a specially built trailer that was camouflaged with leafy boughs and hooked up to a tractor. Law enforcement officials from Michigan, Indiana, and Illinois were involved in their safe passage across state lines.

Along with the animals went four of Getz's best keepers—twins Marvin and Morris Ryzenga and brothers Fred and Leroy Woodruff—who were tasked with training the Chicago staff.

After the move was completed, all that remained were empty enclosures and taxidermy mounts of the animals that had died during their time at Lakewood Farm.

The senior Getz died at the age of 72 in February 1938. The Globe Corporation was then headed by his son, George, who moved the company into the manufacturing of sailplanes, target drones for the military, pleasure boats, motor scooters, other products, and real estate. The Getz family continues to own the Globe Corporation today, concentrating on real estate, asset management, and private equity.

The Getz children sold Lakewood Farm in 1939 to the Trust Company of Chicago. It was then subdivided in 1940. The Vandenberg family of Holland owned the Getz home for many years until selling it to current owners, Ken and Patti Bing of Zeeland. The Bings are involved in a major renovation of the main house and were recently featured on the HGTV program, "If Walls Could Talk." They have no plans, however, to revive George Getz's menagerie: the private zoo that the public loved.

Geoffrey Reynolds is the executive director of the Joint Archives of Holland (Michigan), which collects and protects the archival materials of Hope College and its partner institutions.

The zoo began as a poultry-raising operation, and birds like this peacock made up the majority of the animals.
HEARST HAD A PRIVATE ZOO, TOO

In 1930, Time magazine called George Getz’s menagerie the “largest private U.S. zoo.” But it was by no means the only one in America.

The best known of the era belonged to newspaper publisher William Randolph Hearst. Located at his San Simeon estate halfway between San Francisco and Los Angeles, the zoo was established in 1923 when American bison, Rocky Mountain elk, and European white fallow deer were acquired. Formally named the Hearst Garden of Comparative Zoology, the zoo had its origins in the menageries and game parks maintained by royalty and other wealthy classes of society for thousands of years.

One section of Hearst’s zoo was devoted to carnivores—chiefly bears and big cats—housed in cages for the protection of the publisher and his guests. In contrast, the herbivores were allowed to roam free within large, fenced enclosures, giving the appearance of grazing in their natural state.

Like Getz, Hearst eventually found the upkeep of the menagerie to be a strain on his finances and ordered that the animals be dispersed, starting in 1937. The process of finding them new homes dragged on for more than 15 years, and a few were simply set free on the estate. Today, some of the offspring of these animals still survive; zebras may be found grazing in pastures along California’s Highway 1.

Photo courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.

Kit the leopard was among a bevy of big cats that included black panthers, jaguars, lions, ocelots, tigers, and wildcats.