The New Zoo
A PRIVATELY RUN ZOO IS PLANNED FOR ACADIANA

CABLE PREJEAN DOESN'T judge a zoo by the size of its exhibits or the number of rare and exotic creatures living there. He judges it by what he terms "Oh Mys," or how often people are audibly surprised and impressed by what they encounter.

Down near Cade, Cable and Rose Prejean are putting together the Zoo of Acadiana, which is expected to open in just over a year and a half. It's not, they hasten to tell you, another Audubon Zoo, but neither is it one of those bear-in-a-cage roadside operations. Professionally designed and painstakingly planned, the Zoo of Acadiana will emphasize close views of birds and animals and a family atmosphere.

"I'm basically going to go by 'Oh Mys,' " says Prejean. "Whatever 'Oh Mys' I get, I'll get some more of those [animals]."

Groundbreaking ceremonies are scheduled for this fall. Meanwhile, the Prejeans are currently sharing the 12-acre site with Toni the Tiger; a couple of monkeys; a marmoset who has a squirrel for companionship because its mate died; and a large assortment of birds, chickens and pheasants, some of them more exotic than others. Toni is an 8-year-old Bengal tiger who, from the safe confines of her cage, manages to race, ambush and pounce at people like a kitten, albeit a very, very big one.

Plans call for the acquisition of lemurs, antelope, alligators, deer, llama, a bear, domestic animals for the petting section and birds ranging from East African Crown Crane to common wood duck. One Costa Rican bird pair already on site is one of only five of its species in the United States.

The centerpiece of the zoo will be an open aviary allowing visitors to walk through and be virtually within touching distance of the animals. The long-term trend in zoos large and small is to get away from cages and fencing, instead employing more natural barriers such as water to showcase the animals in their habitat. Nationally, Cable says, "I guess in probably 15 or 20 years you won't see a cage anymore. It will be completely open." Elevated walkways are one type of barrier planned for the Zoo of Acadiana.

The couple hopes the zoo will become an important tourist attraction in Acadiana, a resource for schools and a community activity. Says Rose, "There's a need in the community for something for families to do, " says Rose.

BY JANE NICHOLS

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of Albertson's. The zoo is an ambitious undertaking, especially considering that most zoos are funded and operated by a government or a non-profit group. The Prejeans don't expect to make a profit for several years from their private zoo, but they think it can be done.

Cable Prejean says their philosophy is different from that of public zoos. In his opinion, curators and administrators of large public zoos are more interested in spending thousands of dollars on the latest rare species than in whether their visitors are getting close to the animals and enjoying themselves. "They could care less about the public. All they want to do is raise animals," he says. "My contention is the public doesn't know the difference between a white-tail deer and a $10,000 water buffalo."

The same theory applies to the size of his zoo, which he describes as "bigger than Alexandria's and smaller than Baton Rouge." At large zoos such as Audubon in New Orleans, "They have a million-dollar exhibit and you have to have binoculars to find the animals."

Cable puts the price tag at $250,000 for the Zoo of Acadiana, but he plans to do much of the work himself. The couple has retained a professional zoo architect from Wichita, Kansas, who has drawn up the design and layout plans. A field inspector for the U.S. Department of Agriculture appears regularly for unannounced inspections and to make "suggestions." With admission, food and a gift shop, money can be made, Cable says. Another very lucrative source is raising and selling exotic birds and animals. If a rare pheasant and its mate produce six offspring, for example, the pair can be exhibited in the zoo while the rest are sold.

ROSE DESCRIBES THE ZOO AS Cable's dream: "I say he does all the work and I have all the fun." Cable favors birds and pheasants; he started with one duck. Several years ago, he was doing some work on a woman's house. The woman had several beautiful acres of land, but the only animal in sight was a duck. "It kept following me around," says Cable.

When he asked the woman about the duck, she said he could have it. He took it home, and the next week went to see someone who raised birds and waterfowl to buy a mate for the duck. He ended up not only with another duck, but some pheasants. "I mean, I came home and I looked like the Beverly Hillbillies."

Eventually, he had a half acre with a lot of birds and pheasants. People would stop by his home to look at the birds, and ask if they could bring their children. "When I first met him," says Rose, "and he started talking about building a zoo, I just went, well. . . ." But after he took her to a pheasant convention, she too was hooked.

At least two of the major acquisitions, Toni the Tiger and the monkeys, have resulted from other people's divorces. Whenever possible, the Prejeans try to acquire mates. But exotic animals can be a risky venture. Rose recalls desperately trying to keep a pair of rare birds from freezing to death during last winter's record cold wave; one of the two was lost.

The Zoo of Acadiana has expansion plans for every year after it opens. Says Rose, "I think that everyone who visits us is going to be pleasantly surprised."