The First Zoo of Acadiana

By Mary Tutwiler

NEW IBERIA — E.J. Delcambre had a penchant for animals. Chosen the state's best livestock auctioneer, Delcambre could make his voice ring out with the cadence of a stumping politician and he could persuade a hall full of tightfisted farmers to buy purebred cattle as easily as Earl Long could garner up a peapatch full of votes.

He loved the bovine fluidity of a pasture grazing brahma, the neat leap of a cloven hoofed goat. Sometimes he was so persuasive that he convinced himself and came home not only with his auctioneer's fees but with a bull to boot.

E.J. Delcambre really loved animals. He also loved children. In 1947 he brought a spider monkey, Chico, and an African monkey dubbed Grandma, to his Walton St. house in New Iberia because he thought New Orleans was too far to go for children to see wild animals.

Two monkeys and a way of calling all the kids in the neighborhood over with his auctioneer's patter: that's how the first zoo in Acadiana was built.

The New Iberia Slaughterhouse, Delcambre's business, was across the street from his house and outside the city limits in the late 1940's.

There were barns and cages and four acres of pasture which provided space to contain the hoofed and winged, the fanged and clawed occupants of what was to become a popular local attraction. The monkeys were quickly followed by a pair of white fallow deer.

Delcambre's travels while auctioneering brought him unexpected additions to the zoo. According to Rose Delcambre, E.J.'s widow, E.J. took a detour after a sale in Ville Platte to visit a ranger friend at Chicot State Park. He came home with the park mascot a bear named, "Smookey," who dined on leavings from the slaughterhouse for the rest of his life.

Another bear was acquired from a "gypsy," Rose said, who travelled from town to town wrestling his bear against any willing local strongman. Rose doesn't remember the deal struck between E.J. and the gypsy, but the wrestling bear moved in at the zoo shortly thereafter, a retired heavyweight champion, black bear division.

E.J.'s son, Chris Delcambre, now 39, talks about growing up in a menagerie. He was clearly the most popular kid in the neighborhood.

"It was a great place to play," he said.

One game involved jumping out of the hay loft on a rope swing and dropping into the hay. "Ruby," a black spider monkey, insisted on her turn, keeping all the kids honest. She didn't allow anyone to cut in line, Chris said. She also liked to ride on the handlebars when the boys would cruise the gravel streets on their bikes.

"One morning a tornado tore the roof off of some of the cages. The monkeys got out," Chris said. "The baboon was chasing rabbits. One of the other monkeys was running around the neighborhood. Then the chief of police, Andrew Victor, came over here.

"He said the neighbors had called, they were worried that the lions had gotten loose," he said.

In its heyday the zoo boasted lions, a pond with about a dozen alligators, grey and red foxes, bear, bobcats, a pair of buffalo, a javelina, a herd of white tailed deer, peacocks, dove, and a 225 lb. loggerhead turtle.

"It could get a little noisy in the morning," Rose recalled. "The lions would roar and the peacocks screamed."

Old photos show shade dappled cages where the dove strutted and cooed, and a brahma bull grazed peacefully in the back pasture.

New Iberia natives remember driving out to the slaughterhouse to see the buffalo.

"The female buffalo had a calf but it didn't live," Rose said. "So we crossed the buffalo cow with a brahma bull and she had a beef-a-lo. After that we raised beef-a-lo. People were curious about beef-a-lo meat, what it would taste like, so one time we slaughtered one and shared out the meat.

"It tasted delicious, like heavy beef. I cooked half a round steak and it fed nine people," she said.

In 1962 the bull buffalo died. His head is mounted on the wall in the den of the Delcambre house, testimony to his tenure at the zoo. The paneled room is filled with lifelike or sometimes moth eaten stuffed wild creatures - all that is left of the zoo today.

There is the mounted team of oxen that in life pulled a wagon to give children rides, their heads still yoked together above the fireplace. A 10' anaconda drapes over the door. Angora goat, alligator, even a groundhog has his place on the wall as they did in the zoo on Walton.

E.J. Delcambre died in 1969. The zoo died with him. It was too much for the family to keep up. They donated the animals to a fledgling zoo just starting a collection. That new establishment became the Baton Rouge Zoo.

The Delcambre family is still waiting for a commemorative plaque, long promised, to honor the man who loved animals and children.

Photo by Arthur D. Lauck