

Jim's Perspective...

Zoo Keeper

As I mentioned in the past, I enlisted in the Nebraska Air National Guard in the fall of 1970. I was scheduled to go to basic training at Lackland Air Force Base in San Antonio sometime in late January or early February of 1971. At some point towards the middle of January, the Air Guard contacted me and said Lackland was full and so I couldn't go to basic training until August. I wasn't happy with this development because by the time I learned that I had to wait until August to go to basic training, it was too late to enroll in the spring semester at the University of Nebraska. I had nothing to do. I decided I might as well get a job and make a little money until August.

I decided to visit the personnel department of the Lincoln Parks and Recreation Department. I did this because for the last four years I worked part-time at a city golf course all of which was managed by the Parks and Recreation Department. They knew about me, and I always did a good job. After meeting with folks at the Department, they said they would call me and let me know if there was a job available in the Department. A few days later they called and said they wanted to hire me full-time as a "Keeper Associate" to work in the City Zoo. I agreed to go to work at the Zoo.

An Aside

In order for you to fully appreciate the absurdity and the funniness of this development, you have to know a little something about me as a boy. I didn't care much for animals. I was not an animal lover. However, in about eighth grade, my two little sisters and my little brother all wanted to get a family dog. So the family discussed the idea and took a vote. The vote was five to one. I was the only one who didn't want a dog. I think my mom and my sisters and brother went to the Capitol City Humane Society building and they came home with a cocker spaniel. They named her, Cocoa. In high school my girl friend Janie knew my attitude towards pets and so did my friends.

So that evening, on the day when I learned about my new job, when the family sat down for dinner, I told them about my new job as a Keeper Associate at the Zoo. They all burst into laughter. "You – the boy that doesn't like animals – will be caring for the animals in the Zoo, it doesn't make any sense." they said. I told Janie that I was going to work at the Zoo and she had the same reaction, and burst into laughter. After I started working at the Zoo, my siblings, Janie and other friends would occasionally ask, "Well, Jimmy, how are your animals doing at the Zoo?"

Back to the Story

The Lincoln City Zoo was a long rectangular stone building. All of the animals were housed in cages inside the building. There was no outdoor animal area to the Zoo. The long walls of the rectangular building were on the north and south side of the building. The entrance to the zoo

was on the west side of the building. There was a counter just inside the entrance where folks went to pay for entrance into the zoo and there was a business office adjacent to the counter area. There were also several other private rooms in the front of the building to care for the animals and a space for workers to relax. The middle of the building was two-stories tall. The long north/south walls extended out a ways beyond the two-story structure as a one-story structure. This one-story extension was to help accommodate the animal cages and to provide a work area behind the cages.

In the middle of the interior of the Zoo was a large two-story bird cage. Single animal cages were arranged side-by-side along the north and south walls and along the back wall to the Zoo. There was a wide walkway between the bird cage and the animal cages which extended all the way around the interior of the Zoo which is where visitors strolled to view the animals. Behind all the animal cages there was a large hallway that was used by Zoo workers to tend to the animals. The cages had cement walls along three sides of the cage and the ceiling, with metal bars inserted in the front of the cage so visitors could see the animals. At the back of the cage there was a metal door that could be opened from the private hallway behind the cages. An odd thing, though, was that just outside the rear of the cages, there was a cement trough/canal just below the cage doors. This trough was like an open sewer. It was about the size of a gutter on a house. It was built with a slight decline so that the sewage in the trough would flow down to an end-point of the trough where it emptied into a metal bucket. Workers pushed a small portable cage in front of the door of the animal cage and somehow got the animal to enter this portable cage. Then a worker got into the main cage and cleaned it out with a hose. All of the excrement and other stuff in the main cage was flushed out into this open trough and it drained down to the bucket. One of my jobs was to take the smelly metal bucket to a corner of the Zoo building, open a metal door attached to the floor and dump the contents of the pail into a pipe which took the contents into the city sewer system. This open sewer process gave the Zoo an odd smell. A trough could handle sewage for about five cages, so there were multiple troughs and multiple buckets to dump into the sewer pipe. The Zoo building was very old, probably built in the 1920's, which explains why it had such a primitive cage drainage system.

I did some feeding of various animals and also went into the bird cage to feed the birds. I also did some cleaning of the open walking area for Zoo visitors. Besides the birds, the Zoo had a crocodile, several monkeys, a mountain lion, a gorilla, several large turtles and other animals that I no longer can remember. The crocodile always just sat very still, except when I occasionally threw in a fish at which moment the crocodile immediately jumped to the food and swallowed it whole in just a few seconds. Amazing speed.

There was a male monkey which was the most astounding animal in the Zoo. The monkey would be standing in the middle of the cage. Some Zoo visitors would walk up to the fence in front of his cage. [There was fencing in front of all the cages so that visitors could not get to the bars of the cages.] Suddenly, the monkey would jump up into the bars of his cage – just holding himself attached to the bars about midway up the bars. He would then spit on the visitors. He was very accurate! The onlookers yelled and were surprised. The monkey started laughing. This was his standard activity. All of the workers knew what he did, and they made sure to stay away from the front of the monkey's cage – except me! You see, when I first started working at the Zoo, early in the morning before visitors arrived, I would go see this monkey. At first, he

might spit at me, but when this happened I jumped around, put my hands on my head, twirled around and smiled at him. He laughed. I kind of kept having fun with him and he eventually never spit at me again. We were friends! Eventually, the Zoo placed a piece of clear plastic sheeting in front of the cage so he could no longer cover the visitors with spit. The other Zoo workers just laughed at my relationship with the monkey. They just thought it was hilarious. My girlfriend, Janie, was impressed! Her boyfriend must be part monkey! How unique!

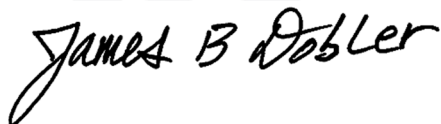
That's life!

After I enlisted in the Air Guard, if someone would have come up to me and said, "Oh Jim, that's so good that you joined the Air Guard, because now you will be able to work at the Zoo and become best friends with a monkey – lucky you!" I would have told them they were crazy! But that is what happened. Had I not enlisted in the military, I would have never experienced the Zoo and would have never had a monkey as my friend. Ah! The serendipity of life! As we experience life, day to day, things can happen to us that change who we are. Life has new perspectives, new experiences, new dimensions. Imagine if life was a locked-in process and nothing would change. You were wired with a set of thoughts that were locked in. How boring! In some ways, life is a random thing, but I think that is good! Bring on tomorrow!

When our kids were young, they decided they wanted a dog. I had a little different attitude about animals then, thanks to my time at the Zoo and my friend, the monkey. I was fine with it. We got a dog from the Humane Society. The kids named the dog Honey. I did not go with them to get the dog. Janie and the kids went. Janie explained they were just going to look, but the kids just fell in love with this dog, and Janie couldn't say no, and so they brought it home.

I close with the perfect song for this article. It is *At The Zoo*, by Simon & Garfunkle.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6xKLBne1CoI>



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