

ARIZONA'S FIRST ZOO

By Tom Kollenborn © 1995

Arizona's first zoo was located in Apache Junction some forty miles east of the Phoenix Zoo or old Maytag Zoo in Phoenix, Arizona. George Cleveland Curtis, the founder of Apache Junction, immediately recognized the need for an attraction at his newly emerging business at the crossroads of the Apache Trail (SR 88) and the Globe-Phoenix Highway (U.S. Highway 60) in 1923. Curtis started his zoo with a chimpanzee named Jimmie. Curtis continued adding animals to the zoo until he had quite a collection of animals. His collecting was primarily limited to animals of Arizona, but he did have some exotic animals. The Arizona Game and Fish Department issued George Curtis a permit to operate a zoo in the early 1930's. This permit was the first such permit issued in Arizona making Curtis' Apache Junction Zoo the first in Arizona.

The Apache Junction Zoo was located immediately east and north of the Apache Junction Inn. Today this approximate location is along the western side of Basha's Parking Lot and slightly to the north. For several years the zoo was free to the traveling public. Curtis started charging a dime admission to the zoo to help maintain the facility. Some years after Jack and Beverly Anderson took over the junction they continued this nominal admission fee to help defray the cost of food for the animals and maintenance. The zoo contained a variety of animals indigenous to the Sonoran Desert, but not exclusively. Curtis had a Mountain lion, Mule deer, Sonoran White-Tail deer, Peccary, Desert Bighorn sheep, Black bear, Bobcat, Gray fox, Kit fox, Coyote, Ring Tail Cat, Coati Mundi, Badger, Skunk, Mexican Raccoon and a variety of small animals native to the Arizona desert. Curtis had a Mountain lion that gave birth to triplets. It was a very rare event for a Mountain lion. The births were reported by numerous newspapers of the era. The collection of animals also included rattlesnakes, coral snakes, and some non-poisonous snakes. Anderson added exotic animals such as the African lion, Emu, Ostrich and a variety of snakes including cobras.

In the late 1970's several Arizona historians were not aware of the existence of the Apache Junction Zoo, therefore they all believed the old Phoenix Maytag Zoo was the first zoo in Arizona. The Maytag Zoo later became know as the Phoenix Zoo and is today the finest zoo in Arizona.

Mrs. Anderson, several years ago, told me the Apache Junction Zoo was the first zoo licensed in Arizona. Tommy Jones, a pioneer resident of Apache Junction, worked as the caretaker of the Apache Junction Zoo for more than a decade. Jones worked for Cliff "Pappy" Russell as an all-around handyman at his automotive garage on Ocotillo Street for more than a decade after being the caretaker at the zoo.

Jones had also worked as a cowboy on the old Quarter Circle U Ranch for the Barkley Cattle Company during roundup each spring and fall. Somebody told the story one time Tommy Jones learned his riding skills and how to care for animals as a Buffalo soldier with the 10th U.S. Army Cavalry on the Mexican -US border.

George Cleveland Curtis did indeed establish Arizona's first public zoo, even if some zoo professionals do not want to recognize the Curtis-Anderson zoo as a zoo, but only a side road attraction. I have many fond memories of the zoo as a child. My first visit was in 1944 when my father paid my admission and took me through the zoo. I was living in Globe at the time and attending Hill Street Elementary School.

The Apache Junction Zoo operated for thirty-two years from 1923-1955. The zoo closed in the summer of 1955 because of a devastating flash flood. The Zoo was destroyed and many of the animals escaped into the desert. The zoo never was really established after the flash flood of 1955. Today, all that remains of the old Apache Junction Zoo are a few old ancient photographs. These images preserve the history of an interesting aspect of Apache Junction's history, hopefully that will never be forgotten.

