

# The London and Middlesex

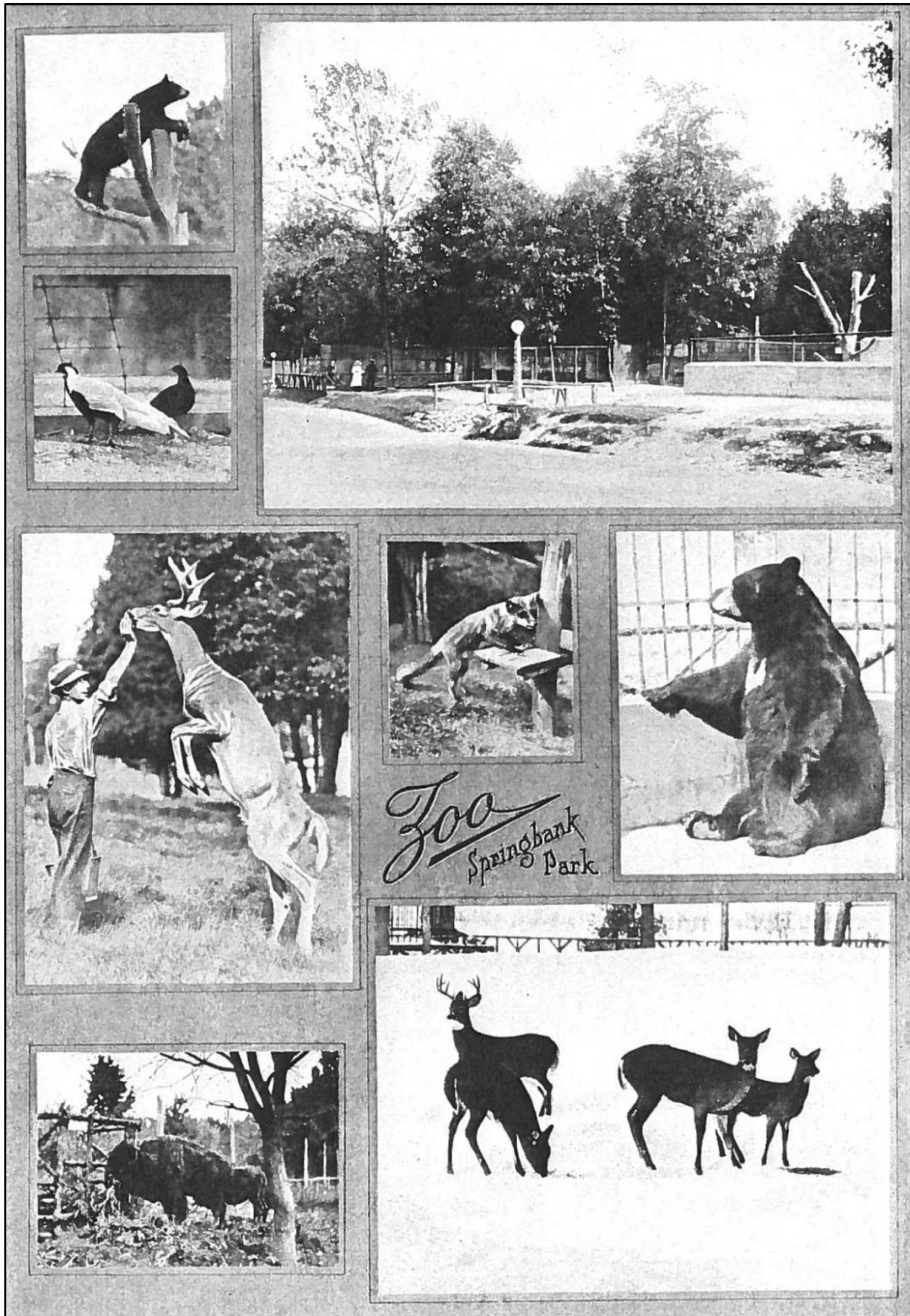
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PUC annual report, 1923, page 65.

## When Springbank Park Had a Zoo

Catherine B. McEwen

All traces of a zoo in London's Springbank Park have vanished now, but one existed there for over forty years in the twentieth century. Strangely enough, it all started by accident when Lieut. Col. Francis B. Leys' herd of deer escaped from their enclosure at his home in South London in 1902 - and thereby hangs a tale.

Col. Leys had a life-long love of animals, having been born on a farm in Pickering Township in 1839. He moved to London around 1868 as captain and paymaster of No. 1 Military District, rising in rank over the years. While maintaining his ties with the militia, he became the first manager of the Dominion Savings and Investment Society in 1875. Three years later, he moved his family to a growing suburban area just south of the Thames River in Westminster Township. This property afforded him enough room for a large house, landscaped gardens, an orchard, a park, outbuildings and stables. Although he owned race horses that were good enough to be entered in the Queen's Plate, his greatest pride was his favourite driving horse which he trained to return home from his office in downtown London - by itself - when it was not needed.

The civic-minded Colonel served on such boards as the Grand Opera House Company, the Horticultural Society, and the Dorchester Fishing Club. In addition, he was one of the first directors of the Northern Life Assurance Company, as well as the president of the Western Fair and the Masonic Temple Company. He was a major supporter for the building of Askin Street Presbyterian Church and was a South London Public School trustee for 12 years. On December 27, 1882, the

*London Advertiser* reported on the school's annual entertainment and awards night which had taken place the previous evening. Since Col. Leys had been occupied with handing out prizes to the students, he was genuinely surprised when the chairman called him forward, lauded him for his many contributions to the school, then presented him with a prize of his own in the form of a mysterious package. On opening it in full view of the audience, the well-known animal lover discovered a small kitten, much to the amusement and delight of all, including Col. Leys.

Education remained of prime importance to the Colonel for he actively supported the building of Victoria School. When he was elected Liberal M.P.P. for London in 1898, a new provincial Normal School was under consideration but its location had yet to be decided. Col. Leys proved to be a major force in turning the tide in London's favour. After the city was awarded the facility, few people were surprised when it was built in the Colonel's neighbourhood of South London.

"Woodlawn", his home at 111 Elmwood Avenue, had a fenced deer park at the front of the extensive property. In the summer of 1902, all six of his deer escaped from their enclosure. Being relatively tame, five of them were rounded up and returned to their pen, but the sixth bolted. Being separated from the others, it panicked and ran westerly through McArthur's farm and the Cove flats to the Pipe Line Road (Springbank Drive), then raced toward the Woodbine Hotel before turning down the side road (Wonderland Road South), where it was eventually captured. The exhausted animal was carted home but died soon afterward.<sup>1</sup>

On July 21<sup>st</sup>, the day after the great deer escape, London's Board of Water Commissioners held its regular meeting. One of the items on the agenda was an offer by Col. Leys to turn his five remaining deer over to the board, if the commissioners would agree to take care of them at Springbank Park. Prior to the formation of the Public Utilities Commission (PUC), the Water Commission was responsible for some land containing excellent springs on the south side of the Thames River west of London. After the City had bought that initial piece of property in 1878, a pumphouse was constructed beside the river and the water from the springs was pumped to a reservoir on top of the high hill immediately to the south, then a pipeline was built from the reservoir along a road allowance back into London. As more land was acquired along the river, the City began developing it and Springbank Park evolved. Col. Leys' proposal to move his deer there would have been an added feature for the public's enjoyment.

With regards to his proposal, *The London Advertiser* reported on July 22<sup>nd</sup> that: "The commissioners will decline the offer with thanks." The newspaper promptly polled a number of people about starting a zoo and discovered a great deal of enthusiasm for the idea. Acting Mayor Winnett said he was: "... very much in favor of securing the deer", and Alderman McMechan stated: "I think the water commissioners made a mistake when they declined Col. Leys' offer." An unidentified citizen praised London's riverside park saying: "... unless one has seen the parks in other cities where they have a zoo, it is impossible to realize what a fine place we have at Springbank."<sup>2</sup> In spite of the positive feelings, nothing further developed over the next decade. Meanwhile, Col. Leys died at Woodlawn on September 11, 1905. Eventually, a Parks Department was formed in 1912 and the Board of Water Commissioners was replaced by the Public Utilities Commission in 1914.

In August of 1915, over a decade after Col. Leys had made his proposal, the Parks Department finally accepted its first gift of animals. Edmund Weld, clerk of the crown, donated three raccoons to start a zoo at Springbank.<sup>3</sup> The animals liked their new living quarters so well that they holed up in the wooden structure by late September, out of sight of the public. When the zookeeper tried to force them out into the fenced enclosure by boarding up the doors, they promptly burrowed back under the walls and settled down inside to hibernate – this time undisturbed. Deer would never have done that!

In October, *The London Free Press* donated two owls named "Zimmie" and "Lizzie", promoting the feathered cartoon characters in its front page weather column.



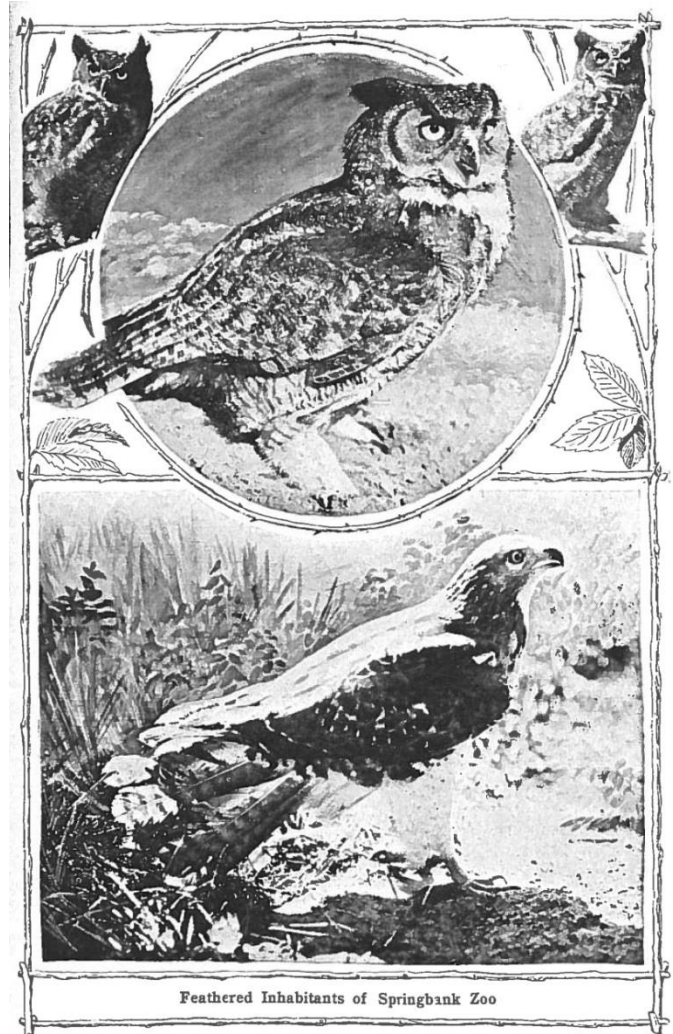
*London Free Press*, Oct. 2, 1915.

At the same time, Private A. Peckham, of 524 York Street, offered his pet owl and PUC General Manager Edward V. Buchanan accepted it as well. World War I was raging and the soldier wanted to find a home for his bird before he went overseas. The PUC's annual report for 1915 listed the payment of \$1.50 to Charles W. Heaman for beef for feeding the owls. It was a modest but positive beginning for the zoo. While these gifts were gratefully received, the Parks Department belatedly decided to look into the acquisition of some deer. Since there was a surplus at Rondeau Provincial Park, Sir Adam Beck, London's M.P.P., was asked for help.

1916 got off to an inauspicious start. The PUC offered a reward of \$10 for the arrest and conviction of the person who broke into the coonhouse and stole two of its raccoons – with no results. However, preparations were under way by March for a four-acre deer enclosure midway between the pumphouse and the park's dance pavilion to the south. Unfortunately, the deer from Rondeau Park didn't arrive in a timely fashion, so when J.M. Young of Sarnia offered his red deer, London's PUC gladly accepted the gift and employees trucked him to Springbank on August 4<sup>th</sup>.<sup>4</sup> But eager Civic Holiday crowds were disappointed when the shy buck stayed hidden in his shelter most of the day. At the same time, the zoo's first alligator went missing, but fortunately for all involved, it was recaptured in the river on August 10<sup>th</sup>.

The zoo was soon to have some new additions as word began to spread about the growing menagerie. James Carter, Governor of the Middlesex County Jail, bought a "genuine Arizona turkey buzzard" from young Wesley Dickson of McGillivray Township later that August. Dickson had shot the bird but the wounded scavenger had been recovering at the family farm where Carter bought it for \$1. He tethered his new "jail bird" in the jail yard for a short time before turning it over to

the zoo's burgeoning aviary.<sup>5</sup> It had a limited debut, however, as it only survived until December when a newly-arrived Great Horned Owl did it in.



PUC annual report, 1917, page 77.

The deer herd grew to four by October. The first buck, known as "Jack", was joined by a younger one named "Bud". After two does finally arrived from Rondeau, officials considered the herd to be complete. Dogs got into their enclosure that fall but did minimal damage. During a second dog attack in March of 1917, Bud became entangled in the wire fence and broke his leg. Veterinarian Dr. William J. Wilson decided it was best to put him out of his misery. Jack, on the other hand,

escaped by jumping over the lofty fence, then swam across the river and made his way to safety in Redmond's swamp where he was discovered several days later. This spot was also known as the Byron Bog and eventually, the Sifton Botanical Bog, near Oxford Street West.<sup>6</sup> After this episode, the keepers realized that the spaces between the strands of fencing were too wide, so wire netting was added and the dog problem was solved.

There was more excitement to come in the deer park. In June, Jack proved once again that he was a real "jumping jack" when he was startled by a streetcar-load of children from St. George's Public School. At that time, the city's electric rail line ended its westerly route in Springbank Park with a loop near the south side of the animal enclosures. Upon arrival, the exuberant children let out a mighty shout which prompted Jack to leave in a hurry. He launched himself in a perfect arc over the fence and headed for parts unknown. He was recovered the next morning while grazing peacefully with the cattle and sheep on Col. Robert McEwen's farm, several kilometers southwest of Byron.

The zoo continued to grow with the donation of a pair of raccoons by Roy Blinn of Brick Street. This restored the raccoon population to its original number of three. In a rare fit of spending, the PUC paid John Rogers of Wingham \$8 for a pair of red foxes and \$2 for a hawk brought in by Alexander Fuller.

Before any more animals were received at Springbank, General Manager E.V. Buchanan decided to do some much-needed research. He visited Detroit's zoo in the summer of 1917 to see how its bear cages were constructed since a secure facility was an important consideration before London's first bruin arrived in late October. It was donated by Arthur H.B. Keene, of Keene Bros., home furnishers, who obtained a year-old brown bear from Algonquin Park through friends in the north.



PUC annual report, 1917, page 78.

On November 19, 1917, *The London Free Press* reported:

... General Manager E.V. Buchanan, ... and his staff of keepers, are unused to the care of bears. The little brown fellow they have ... gave every evidence of severe pains in his "tummy", causing partial paralysis yesterday, and were at a loss for a remedy. Mr. Buchanan sought to get in touch with the keeper of the bears at Dundurn Park, Hamilton, but was unsuccessful. However, some farmers who happened along by the park yesterday diagnosed the bear's

*symptoms as those evidenced by young pigs after a spell of too much eating and recommended castor oil. Accordingly a big dose was mixed up and administered. Mr. Buchanan and his staff are now hoping for the best.*

One week later, the same newspaper reported that the critically sick bear had been removed from his cage and was lying, partially paralyzed, in a work building. The veterinarian held out little hope for his recovery, and indeed, he died three days later.

This incident did not diminish the donor's enthusiasm, for Arthur Keene vowed to get a number of replacements as soon as hibernation was over in the spring. Not only that, his brother and business partner, Oliver G. Keene, gave a pair of beavers before the end of the year. In the spring of 1918, Arthur Keene was true to his word when he obtained two black bears from northern Ontario in May. Then, PUC Commissioner Thomas W. McFarland presented the zoo with a pair of hen hawks, and two golden pheasants were also added. Four foxes had an enclosure near one occupied by two coyotes, but the male bear was mistreating his mate so a separation was being contemplated. The zoo grew larger still in June when it saw some of its first births and received new donations. Arthur H. Brener, a local tobacconist, gave two alligators early in the month, while "Cleo" the fawn was born on June 8<sup>th</sup> amidst an explosion of 187 white rabbits that were inhabiting the deer enclosure.<sup>7</sup> By mid-July, electrician Hiram S. Albertson had presented a porcupine to the zoo.

Next came an opportunity for a larger and more visible attraction. Robert Miller of St. Thomas had bought four bison or buffalo in the northeastern United States but was willing to sell them to London's PUC. After negotiations over the price and the number of animals were unsuccessful in February of 1919, Arthur Keene

came to the rescue once again by purchasing the buffalo before they were sent to an abattoir. A deal was reached for three of them to be delivered to the park at a price of \$375, while Mr. Keene took the fourth animal to his farm near London. After the buffalo were delivered to Springbank in a box car hauled over the street railway line, apprehensive officials let the animals emerge from the car at their own leisure into their new run adjacent to the deer enclosure. While the exodus went smoothly, officials soon realized that sturdier fencing would be necessary to preserve the safety of the public from these large, unpredictable animals.<sup>8</sup>

In addition to the buffalo, the zoo's collection now included six foxes, four deer, two bears, two beavers, two coyotes, a porcupine, several raccoons, numerous rabbits, pheasants, owls and hawks. As the year wore on, more changes took place which caused the zoo's population to fluctuate.

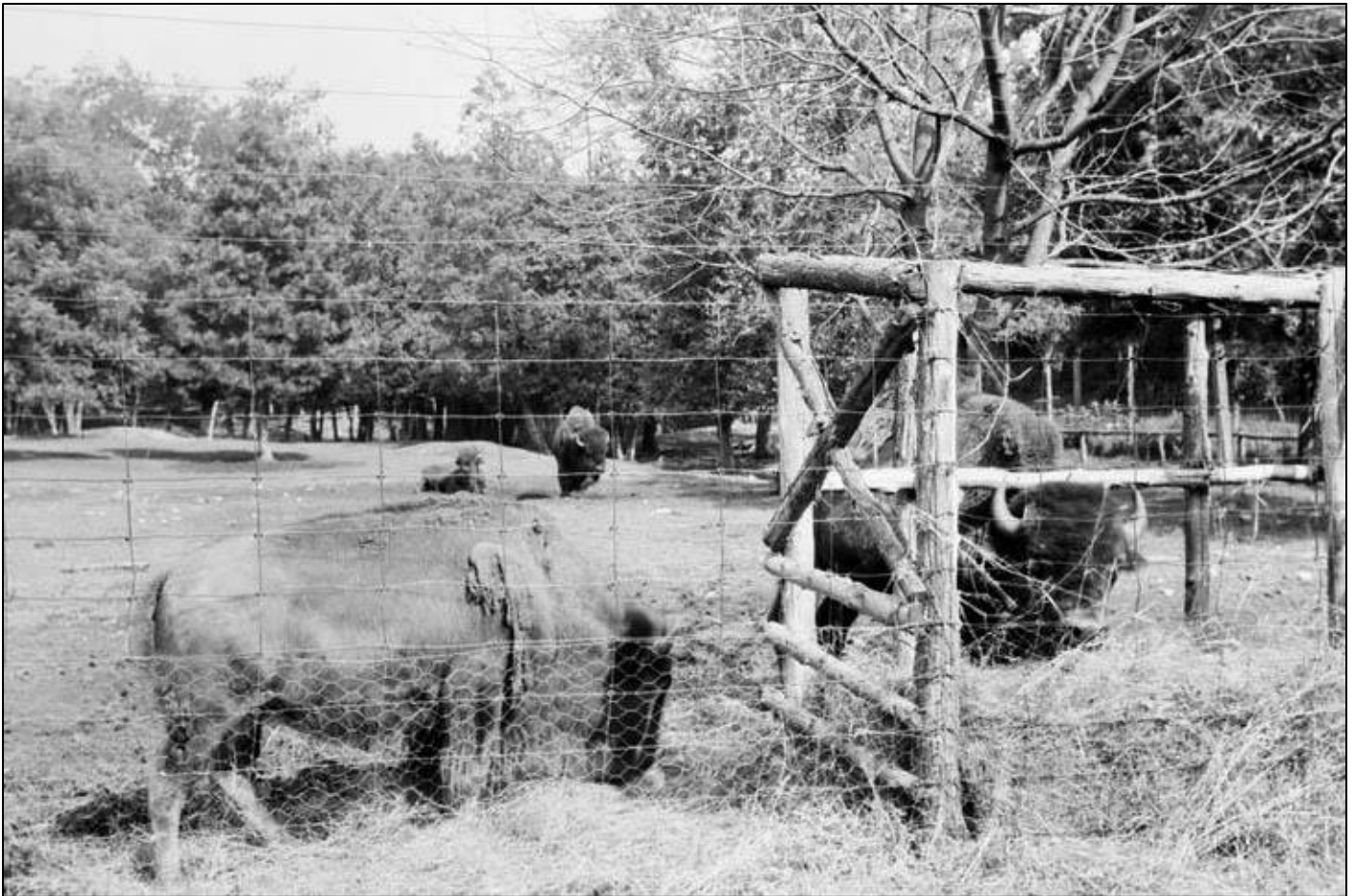
The female bear died under cloudy circumstances, a pheasant was received from Arthur Hill of Tecumseh Avenue, and two of the red foxes died in December.

By the spring of 1920, more deaths had thinned the ranks in the zoo. The bear population had dropped to one male and the fox pen was reduced to a single occupant. Since its budget was restricted, the Parks Board appealed to the public to donate "acceptable" animals. Exotic creatures originating in tropical climates would not be accepted, nor would skunks. As an incentive, it was announced that anyone providing an animal would have their name inscribed on a sign attached to the front of their animal's cage, but this was not attractive enough to trigger a flood of donations. In April, a Great Blue Heron happened to land near the fountain in Victoria Park and the staff managed to catch the feisty bird with surprisingly little damage to its captors.



Springbank Park Zoo c1920. Courtesy of Library & Archives Canada.





Buffalo at Springbank Park Zoo c1920. Courtesy of Library & Archives Canada.

After the heron was delivered to Springbank, its flight feathers were clipped so it could not fly away when it was released in the deer enclosure.

In May of the same year, a hawk was added to the zoo, as well as a vixen for the lonely fox. Then, unforeseen excitement erupted after some new birds were put into the raccoons' cage and the displaced creatures were moved in with the porcupine. This proved to be an unhappy arrangement, for the raccoons promptly attacked the porcupine, but the bristly creature stood his ground and the sorry aggressors retired from combat, much the worse for wear. Inspector George Tustin of the Humane Society was called in to remove the quills and salve their wounds as the raccoons were moved to a safer place.<sup>9</sup>

London received a number of offers of animals for the zoo, but at significant prices. American and Canadian companies and zoos had specimens for sale, such as a 600 pound grizzly bear at a dollar per pound. The Washington Zoological Gardens had a pair of buffalo which they offered to sell for \$250 each, as well as European brown bears at \$60 apiece. Detroit had elk and various types of deer for sale, while Toronto would dispose of a buffalo for the bargain price of \$150. Instead, Springbank Park's management waited and welcomed its first baby buffalo born on September 28, 1920, bringing the herd up to four.

By November, two brown bear cubs were added to the menagerie. This brought their total number up to five – the two brown cubs, Arthur Keene's two black cubs and "Bluebeard", the adult male black bear. At the same time, Fred J. Weldon, of Hyman Street, turned in a Great Horned Owl. He had shot it while on a hunting trip near Kettle Point but it was not seriously hurt. On other occasions, similarly injured animals, after being offered to the zoo, had not always survived.

We gain some insight into challenges experienced by the zoo's management in March of 1921 when General Manager E.V. Buchanan received an anonymous letter alleging that food which was "left to sour" on the floors of the cages had caused the deaths of some of the animals. While Buchanan agreed that this problem should be remedied, he told an *Advertiser* reporter that only six animals had died during the four years of the zoo's existence. He explained:

*... Of these deaths, it is possible that some fault, such as the writer suggests, may have been responsible for the death of two foxes and one bear, but this is a point that cannot be proven.*

*Every possible care known to those in charge of the animals is taken to insure their health and comfort.*

*The other three deaths were due in two cases to accidents, and in one, that of the porcupine, to old age, the animal being quite aged when given to the zoo. The accidental deaths were those of a deer and a bear. In the case of the bear, it resulted from a wound caused by a bullet, the source of which was never found. The authorities are reluctant to believe that the shooting was done intentionally preferring to believe that the bullet was a stray one. The deer died as the result of being chased by a dog which got into the inclosure. In its efforts to escape from the dog the frightened animal made an effort to jump the nine-foot fence, but struck the wire, fracturing one of its legs. It was found necessary to shoot it.<sup>10</sup>*

By the spring of 1921 the zoo had four new bear cubs, one adult black bear, five deer, four buffalo, five raccoons, two beavers, one red fox, one porcupine, two golden pheasants, six wild geese, five drakes, one crane, one turkey buzzard, three owls and 12 rabbits. Many people visited the zoo on Good Friday when the four bear cubs kept their audiences entertained for hours. However, the two bull buffalo were vying for the attention of the lone female and the keepers were worried about the possibility of serious injuries. While an offer of \$175 was made for one of the bulls by people in Bath, N.Y., transportation was an issue since the railway companies refused to accept the potentially unruly creature unless he was handed over to them securely crated. Unfortunately, the Parks officials were not certain they could do that safely. On May 23<sup>rd</sup>, a moose that was shipped from the Maritimes finally arrived at London's Grand Trunk Railway station. As a result of the long trip under confined conditions, it died at the station before the Parks Department could accept it. On a happier note, one of the red deer at the zoo gave birth to twins on the holiday weekend, and D.B. MacVicar, of 421 Oxford Street, donated a pair of quail in June. When Inspector Tustin of the Humane Society toured the facility, he gave it a passing grade.

E.V. Buchanan's pleas for donations yielded some better results by mid-July. Mrs. Ronald (Lorna) Harris, daughter of Sir George C. Gibbons, provided two black swans from Australia which were housed in the water fowl enclosure. Then Mayor Edgar S. Little donated a pair of Harbor Seals from Maine, and other gifts came in as well, making it necessary to move some of the animals to interim quarters until permanent ones could be built. During this juggling act, the seals were put into the beavers' pen, while the latter were moved into one of the bears' enclosures. The beavers promptly did what beavers do and gnawed down the eight-inch-thick tree stump that the bear cubs had enjoyed climbing.<sup>11</sup>

When the new quarters were ready for the four bears, three of them co-operated in the move by exiting through the open cage door into a large box for their transferal, but the fourth steadfastly refused to join its mates. The attendants remained outside the bars and chased "the pesky critter" most of the morning but gave up for fear of stressing it in the summer heat. The next morning, the bear continued to elude them until, finally, it was roped and tied securely for removal to the new pen. This area had a larger pool and a bigger tree stump for the animals to climb.

**IS SPRINGBANK ZOO POPULAR?**



The photo answers the question in the headline, showing adults and just a few children crowded around the new bear pit. *The London Advertiser*, Aug. 17, 1921 (front page).

After the Harbor Seals arrived, they went on a perplexing month-long fast, refusing to eat any of the food they were offered. The zookeepers were stymied until a young boy caught some minnows in the nearby Thames River and threw them into the seals' pond where they were promptly devoured. So all returned to normal once their preferred diet of live fish was established. Too often, animal management was a matter of trial and error at this stage in the zoo's existence.

The PUC's annual report for 1921 reflected significant changes at the zoo. While construction costs in 1920 had been \$124.50, the final tally for 1921 was \$1904.03. Maintenance costs remained about the same at \$977.53 in 1920 and \$1006.89 in 1921.

Unfortunately, the Springbank Park complex was not immune to depredations. A \$50 reward was offered to anyone giving information leading to the arrest of the vandals who hit the park on June 18, 1922. In addition to the destruction of a beautifully designed flowerbed at the eastern entrance to the park, a fawn was discovered wandering at large, far from the deer enclosure. Worst of all, one of the black swans presented to the zoo the previous summer had disappeared. Nothing but some feathers were found. A reward remained open on any destructive acts in the future. In spite of this setback, a variety of donations continued to arrive, including the first peafowl.

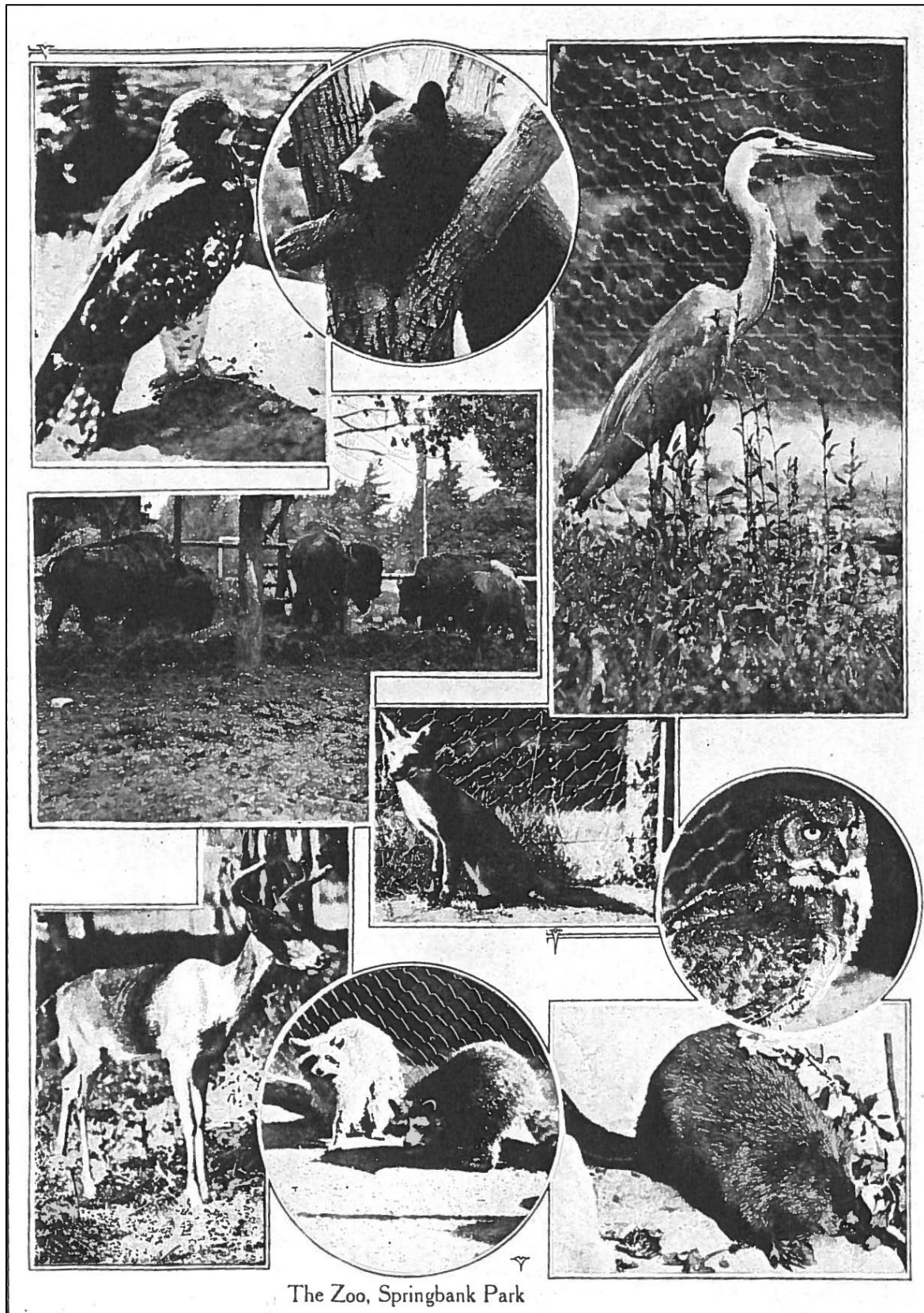
In 1923, one of London's most eminent citizens, druggist and ornithologist William Edwin Saunders, invited W.H. Sheak to come to the city to investigate conditions at the zoo. The native of Indiana was an expert in the management of birds and animals in captivity. He was a consultant to such famous circuses as Ringling Bros. and Barnum &

Bailey. While the zoo had passed previous inspections by the Humane Society, W.E. Saunders, like other concerned citizens, had not been satisfied with affairs at the zoo. He told an *Advertiser* reporter that:

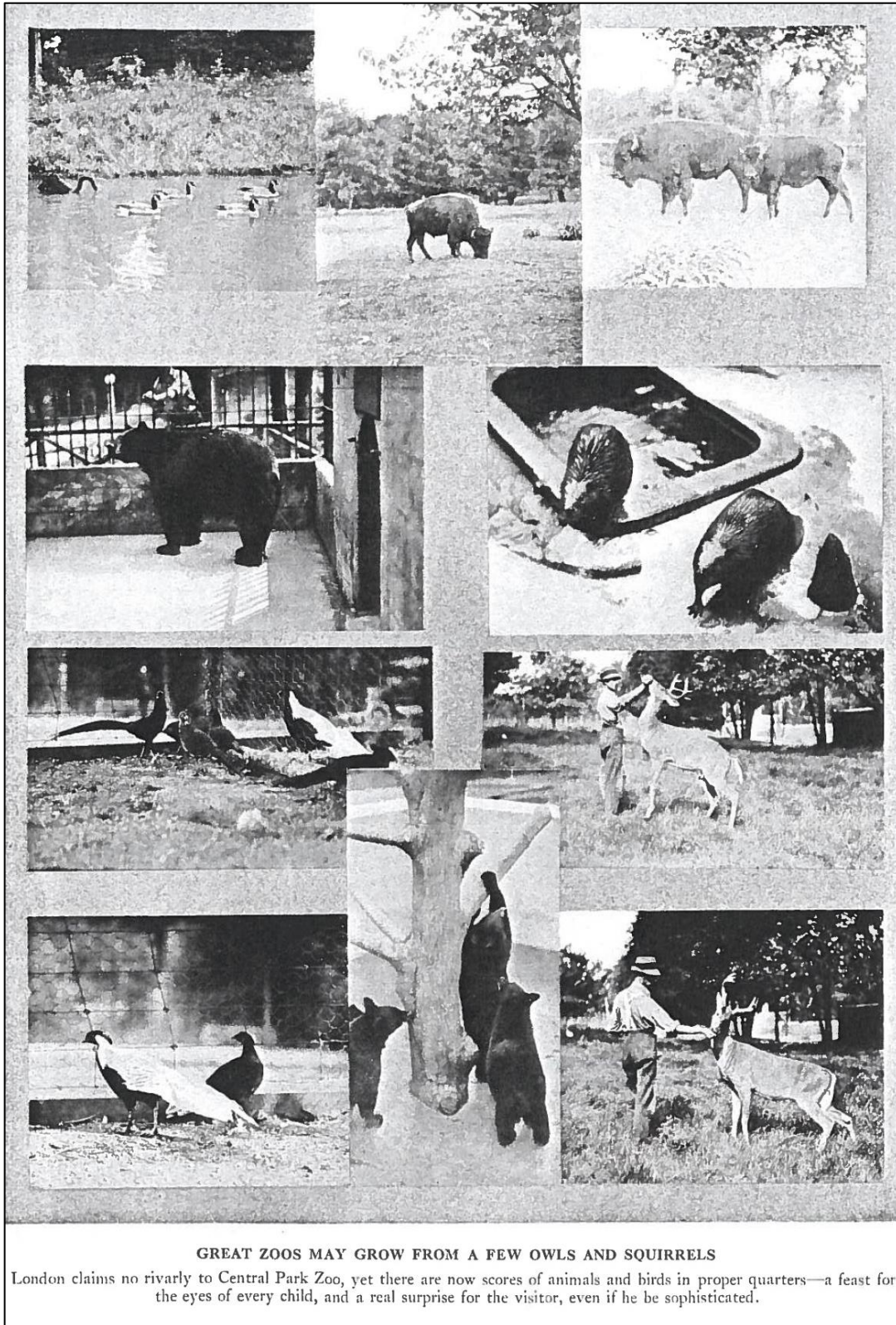
*"The loss of bear cubs has been particularly noticeable, and, in fact the whole situation of the animals out there needs looking into, and should be put into the hands of some man who has a thorough knowledge of the subject. It is too important a job to be left in the hands of an amateur."*<sup>12</sup>

Sheak started his inspection at Springbank on May 3<sup>rd</sup> and promptly pointed out a signage error, explaining that the "buffalo" were actually "bison". He also advised the attendants to stop feeding any more "broken sweet biscuits" since "sugar is not good for animals at any time." On the other hand, he complimented the official keeper, Charles McConnell, on doing a good job. In due time, Sheak compiled a list of recommendations for an improved feeding regimen as well as some better cage accommodations.

As 1923 drew to a close, the oldest female buffalo died unexpectedly, for it seemed that the people and the press continued to use the popular name for the animals. Then, Walter Wigmore, of 586 Waterloo Street, made a gift of his family's pet goat, "Billy". He was put in with the deer and the buffalo. When the deer first tried to greet him, he lowered his head and charged at them. Subsequently, every time he turned his head toward the deer, it was a signal for a mad dash for cover. It soon became obvious why the Wigmore's had made their "generous" donation when his belligerent behaviour toward man and beast became apparent. He even attacked General Manager E.V. Buchanan!



PUC annual report, 1923, page 34.



**GREAT ZOOS MAY GROW FROM A FEW OWLS AND SQUIRRELS**

London claims no rivarly to Central Park Zoo, yet there are now scores of animals and birds in proper quarters—a feast for the eyes of every child, and a real surprise for the visitor, even if he be sophisticated.

On April 15, 1924, *The London Free Press* reported that Billy:

*“Has made his home with everything at the zoo, ...and he has conquered them all. He’s now in a pen with some wild ducks and they are getting wilder.”* However, Billy was soon moved into maximum security where *“the most troublesome inmate on the grounds”* had his very own pen where *“the fence is of special wire and the entire enclosure is constructed of much more substantial material than even that of the buffalo or the bears.”*

One of W.H. Sheak’s recommendations had been to provide larger, more natural surroundings for the raccoons. As a result, they were moved into a new enclosure with a huge maple tree in its centre. Since the staff had neglected to trim off the lower branches, the raccoons soon figured out how to use them to make their escape and happily wandered about the park for some time before being recaptured.

The zoo experienced a high mortality rate in 1924. A buffalo represented the largest loss, while two deer, a peacock, and various water fowl also died. On the positive side, C.L. Wilson of Exeter managed to catch a Bald Eagle that was attacking his hens and eventually turned the huge bird over to the zoo after exhibiting it at various fall fairs. Then, John Moule, of 67 Becher Street, who was London’s police court clerk, donated two swans he had obtained from Pinafore Park in St. Thomas. He was a bird fancier who had a large private collection.

The long-awaited arrival of a pair of elk from Wainwright, Alberta, came in late November. Arrangements had been made by PUC Commissioner Thomas W. McFarland with London’s federal M.P., J.F. “Frank” White, who had contacted the Hon. Charles Stewart, Minister of the Interior, for the donation of the elk. They were put in their own area at the west end of the animal enclosures.

Once again, John Moule helped to arrange for a donation, this time it was a red fox from Daniel Joyes, of 612 Hamilton Road. Less than two weeks later, in mid-December, zookeeper Charles McConnell discovered the theft of two red foxes and several raccoons. Footprints in the snow led to their discarded carcasses on the river bank, then to a nearby house in Byron,<sup>13</sup> but the suspects and the pelts were gone. Dr. Harry A. Stevenson, of 391 Dundas Street, promptly replaced the raccoons with three that he had raised.

The annual report for 1924 had listed total zoo expenses of \$3,768.72, while 1925 showed a considerable drop in construction costs and some reduction in maintenance expenses for a total of \$2,626.22. Expenses rose again in 1926 to \$3,311.40.

The pattern of losses and gains continued through the 1920s. The oldest male bear died early in 1925, then a younger male killed a female in May, an alligator died that fall, and John Moule made his second donation of a pair of swans in early December. An unusual number of Arctic or Snowy Owls were captured by area residents in the autumn of 1926 and the zoo’s aviary grew as a result. That same year, another male bear died. Two monkeys were received in the spring of 1927 and the beavers surprised everyone by producing their first two offspring after 10 years at the zoo.<sup>14</sup>

Through the co-operation of John S. Moore, manager of the London & Western Trusts Company, the zoo received seven young pheasants in the fall of 1927. Earlier in the year, Moore had obtained 33 fertilized pheasant eggs from the zoo’s aviary and took them to his summer cottage at Port Stanley where he used several bantam hens to do the hatching. After weasels killed all but 14 of the young birds, Moore shared them equally with Springbank. He also donated a red fox as a replacement for one that had got its neck caught in the wire mesh of the fence and died of strangulation.<sup>15</sup>

City bylaws regulating animal ownership were quite lax in previous days, making it possible for people to keep a variety of wild animals on their property. Around 1922, Milton Jackson, the owner of Jackson Cleaners and Dyers, had bought a "South American honey bear" as a pet for his son from William D. Christianson, manager of the F.W. Woolworth Co. store. The Jacksons lived at 250 St. James St. and Christianson lived a few blocks away at 764 Waterloo St. The Jackson home, on the north-east corner of Alma and St. James streets, had a small structure in the backyard for the bear.<sup>16</sup> By 1928, young Jackson had grown up and no longer had time for the bear, so it was donated to the zoo, and another unwanted pet found a refuge.

After the stock market crash of 1929, financial affairs were adversely affected everywhere for the next decade. London's austerity budgeting meant that the zoo received less money rather than more all through the great depression. Because of a lack of space in 1930, two bear cubs were left in the same pen with their father who killed them. Unable to sell the old male to another zoo, authorities sent him to be butchered. Since there was a real need for improved accommodations, E.V. Buchanan and T.W. McFarland visited the Detroit Zoo once again in search of better ideas for the bears' quarters. Despite the challenges, two new cubs were born early in 1931 bringing the total number of the zoo's most popular inmates up to five.

But animals were not the only ones at risk in the park. As the result of an accident at Springbank on September 18, 1930, George Martyn, a local auto mechanic, sued the City of London for \$10,000 and Justice Wright heard the case on May 19, 1931. Martyn testified that he was walking beside the buffalo enclosure when one of the animals smashed through an interior wooden guard rail and hit the stretchy wire fence, injuring him.

After both sides in the case completed their legal arguments, the judge awarded Martyn \$912 for personal injuries and expenses. This sort of thing had not happened before - just an occasional nip on a finger by an over-eager monkey trying to get treats. A young man had been charged with throwing stones at the bears, but this was the first time the City had to pay for an accident at the zoo.

Overcrowding in some of the enclosures continued into 1932. One new bear den was built that year and officials managed to ship two young elk to the Kirkland Lake game reserve for the Department of Game and Fisheries. Although the PUC tried to sell or trade bears, buffalo and elk, they met with very little success. As a result, they were forced to find different solutions. Under a special license from the Ontario Government, two city police officers shot four young elk at the park on December 16<sup>th</sup>. The carcasses were trucked to Alderman Harry Bottrill's abattoir where they were butchered and 800 pounds of meat was turned over to the City's relief department for distribution to the unemployed.

However, a small improvement to life at the zoo had been made for the welfare of the furless monkeys and any sick animals during the cold winter months. They were housed in a new two-storey concrete block building where fodder was stored in the lower level and electric heaters kept the animals comfortable in the area above.

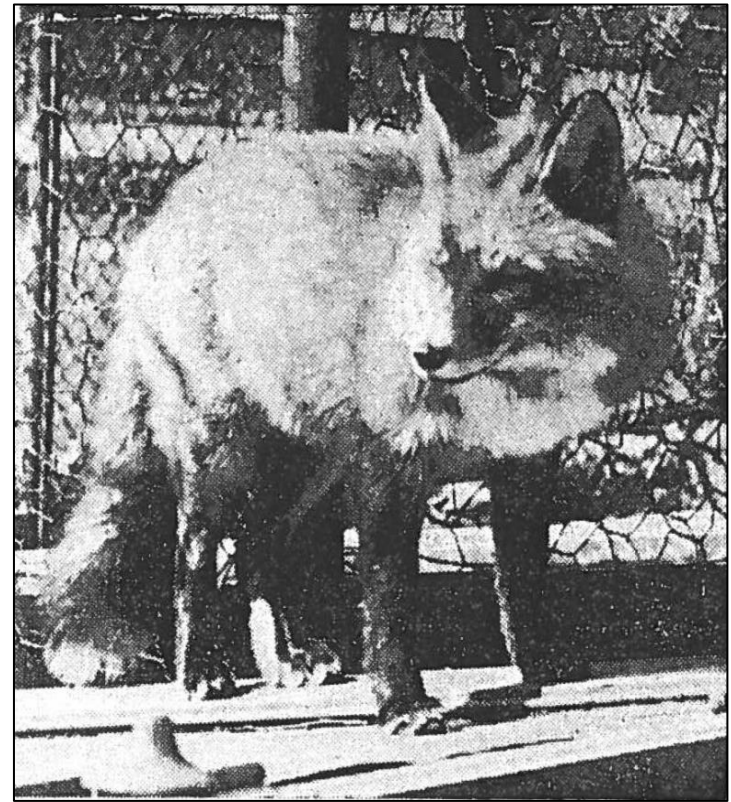
Parks Superintendent W.E. "Ted" Foster announced that the high price of hay, at \$20 a ton, was causing a serious problem for the zoo. Although the Parks Department grew as much feed as possible, the buffalo, elk and deer needed a constant supply of hay which was beyond the department's ability to provide. In addition, the City's grant to the zoo had been cut while the price of hay had risen. With this in mind, Foster warned that another cull might be



the only solution since no other zoos needed London's surplus animals. As a result, just before Christmas of 1934, after government permission was received, three bears and five elk were slaughtered and the meat was distributed to 150 families in need. It was noted that the meat was of the highest quality since all the animals had been raised in captivity and fed on grain and hay, like domesticated cattle. The bear meat was said to taste like mutton and the elk meat even better than beef!<sup>17</sup>

1935 marked the last year that Springbank Park was serviced by the London Street Railway's line. It was no longer a paying proposition. The zoo remained much the same over the next several years with few additions of special note. London rejected a suggestion from the Sault Ste. Marie Parks Department in 1936 that London might take two of its wolves. Officials recalled how unpopular a pair of coyotes/wolves had been some years earlier, as neighbours for miles around had objected to their nightly howling.

When it became known that the Lord Mayor of London, England, would be attending the opening of the new Canadian National Railways station in London, Ontario, on September 1, 1936, Dr. Hugh Stevenson, a board member of the PUC, contacted authorities in England about a gift of a pair of royal swans. Since the birds are wards of the crown and have special protection on the other Thames River, it seemed like an apt gift on this special occasion. In due course, four swans were shipped across the Atlantic and arrived in advance of the auspicious day when Lord Mayor Sir Percy Vincent made their formal presentation in this London. Unfortunately, one of the new arrivals died on September 4th and a second one succumbed the following February, but the other two survived for a number of years.



Springtime at Springbank. A fox in his den and the swan taking a swim in the Thames River. *The Free Press*, April 11, 1935.

A day before the Lord Mayor's visit, it was discovered that most of the zoo's geese had disappeared. Not wanting to put on a poor show of welcoming the royal swans to the water fowl enclosure, a keeper took the resident Chinese goose up the river and released it. As it paddled around, it honked repeatedly, calling for its errant companions. An hour later, it returned with the missing geese in tow and the welcoming committee was back to full strength. E.V. Buchanan vouched for the truth of this story.<sup>18</sup>

Some long-overdue changes at the park had been made by the spring of 1937. One year earlier, the PUC had finally given approval for the construction of a new wild fowl enclosure to be built around a pond near the zoo. In addition, a new road was built from the pumphouse to the pavilion over the former route of the dismantled street railway tracks. It went through the most densely wooded areas at the westerly end of the park, past the new bird section and between the elk and deer enclosures. An old barn at the extreme west end near Byron had been removed and a new picnic area was under development.



London Advertiser, Aug. 27, 1936 (page 9).

Two of the zoo's fun-loving monkeys, known as Tweedle-Dum and Tweedle-Dee, died under tragic circumstances on March 18<sup>th</sup> as the result of a fire. They had captivated the interest of every child who had come within earshot of the monkey cage with their tricks and line of chatter. Now their mischievous nonsense had come to an end. Their bodies were found that morning in their winter quarters as the fire still smouldered. The keepers said they had died as a result of smoke inhalation, while a third monkey was still alive but in serious condition.

Apparently the animals were playing with the shavings on the floor of their cage and scattered some on the electric heater below them. The shavings caught fire and burned a hole through the floor. Subsequently, some embers dropped into a large barrel in the basement of the winter house setting fire to it and its contents. The resulting smoke suffocated two of the animals above. Thankfully, a number of purebred dogs and several guinea pigs that were lodged in the same area suffered no ill effects.

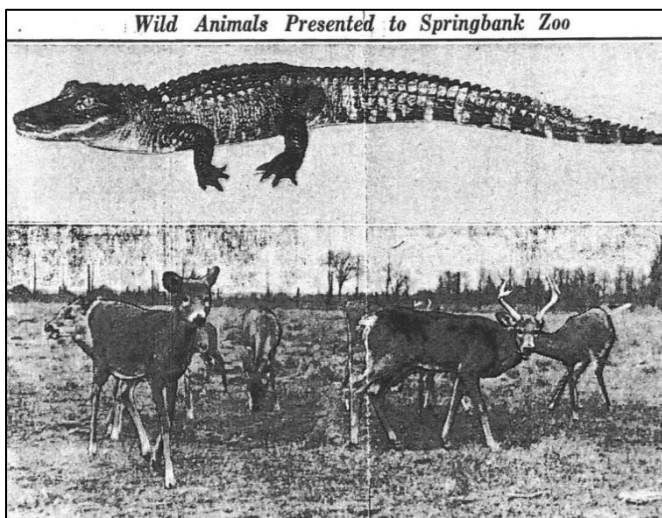


Animals in the Springbank zoo have been receiving good treatment from the hundreds who visit the park daily. In fact they received so many tidbits that they almost refuse to sample the daily rations handed out by the zoo attendants. The above photos were taken at the zoo yesterday by a Free Press cameraman. Top left—Some of the members of the raccoon colony fraternizing with those who were feeding them peanuts. Top right—The bear cubs born in February of this year have been receiving much attention. They are shown on the inside of their cage as they watched for odd bits of food, particularly ice cream, from visitors. Bottom—This little girl had her doll tucked under one arm as she fed the guinea pigs who appeared to be quite tame. This charming visitor was having a great time when photographed.

Photos show visitors enjoying the zoo at Springbank. Racoons are at top left, bear cubs at top right and at bottom the guinea pigs. *The Free Press*, July 22, 1937.

A curiosity was to be found in one of the outer enclosures, for a pure white deer was living among the regular ones. He was born in captivity and looked normal in all respects except for his lack of colour. He seemed to be accepted totally by his darker, spotted cousins.

Late that year, E.M. Burke of Lambeth donated two deer, an alligator and several varieties of geese to the zoo.



Shown above is the alligator and deer donated by E.M. Burke. The alligator was 64 years old despite the fact that it was only three feet six inches long. The deer are shown grazing on the Burke estate, from which two were selected for the zoo. *The Free Press*, Nov. 19, 1937.

For several years, the peahen had not sat on her eggs after laying them, so no new progeny had been hatched. In 1938, however, a keeper collected each egg as it was laid and sent it to an incubator. As a result, six young peacocks were running around the bird enclosure by August. In spite of this one bright spot, most of the needed changes, particularly for the bears, had not been made because of funding cutbacks. Their concrete cages with bars and wire were outdated and small. Only one buffalo remained

by late in the year and a black fox was well past his prime. A worrisome trend was noted by Parks Superintendent Ted Foster in the PUC's annual report:

*“There seems to be a general decline in attendance during the past few years at the park. This has been brought about, more or less, by the elimination of the street railway service to and from the park. The amount spent each year on beautification, maintenance and the upkeep of the Zoo, surely warrants some kind of public road service from the city to the park.”*

Since the bears' enclosures had changed minimally, a bear cub, “Winnie the Pooh”, born early in 1939 was left in the same cage with both of his parents. In the past, cubs had been taken away from any adult males for safety reasons. Thankfully, all went well this time.

Later in the season, three cygnets were hatched by the surviving pair of royal swans and later still, two elks were born. However, it was decided that it would cost too much to provide “Daisybelle”, the lone buffalo, with any new companions – so the fate of that herd was sealed.

In 1940, as a wartime precaution, Reservoir Hill overlooking Springbank, was closed to pedestrian and vehicular traffic by the Parks Department. Guards were posted to protect the large reservoirs that were an important part of the city's water supply, but the park below remained open to the public.<sup>19</sup> After barely surviving the austerity of the 1930s, the zoo faced more lean years during World War II. By 1945, there were 45 animals and 60 birds housed at Springbank.

# Now Is Good Time To Visit the Animals At Springbank Zoo



The above pictures were taken in Springbank Zoo, west of London. At the top is Charles McConnell, for 22 years superintendent of the zoo, giving some of his curious fowl their daily dose of vitamins, via lettuce, which he is shaking out of the bag. Below is Marlene Hammond, 10 Argyle street, London, offering a raccoon a colored button; the 'coon is reaching and obviously trying to say: "Ah, please, lemme have it." Raccoons like to handle things and have tremendous curiosity.

BY W. G. TRESTAIN

*The Free Press*, April 2, 1940.



'Grandpa', the big and elderly male bear at Springank Zoo, sitting by the edge of his drinking pool in the springtime and grumbling. *The Free Press*, Apr. 5, 1940.

### Fun fact!

Shown above is the old male bear named 'Grandpa', also referred to as a 'fourflusher'. He was known for snorting and roaring in a 'terrible way'. The article accompanying the above picture told the tale of the Free Press roving reporter's surprise when he dropped his wristwatch into the bear pit! Zoo superintendent Charles McConnell "just went in and picked up the watch." Although Grandpa roared and made lunges at him, McConnell brandished a rake and Grandpa quickly sat down in a corner roaring and waving his large paws. Grandpa was a big bluffer!

A letter to the editor of *The London Free Press* was published on July 28, 1945, from “AN AMERICAN TOURIST” which put a glaring spotlight on the zoo’s bears.

*Editor Free Press: I recently drove through Springbank Park at Byron and stopped a few minutes to have a look at the bears. My family and I have regretted having done so ever since, as the thought of what we saw has haunted us ever since.*

*It was a hot day and there were the unfortunate and mangy-looking bears in a sunken cement pit in which the heat must have been awful, to say the least. They could not see beyond the four walls of their small pen nor could any breeze reach them.*

*To top it all their small drinking trough was covered with green scum, and as anyone knows, water has to stand unchanged for a considerable time to get in that condition.*

*It is bad enough when so-called civilized people, and here of course I include my own country, will lock up wild animals but that the conditions under which those poor harmless bears are destined to spend the rest of their lives, are allowed to exist is sad indeed.*

*Why does their cage have to be in the full glare of the sun when the park has lots of shady spots?*

*Come on, Londoners, put a stop to this blot on your city and countryside.*

It was not just the outdated bear pits that were in question. E.V. Buchanan said in September: “*This is a matter of policy and it is up to the commission to decide whether we are going to have a zoo or not.*” At the end of the year, the PUC adopted a report prepared by J. Bevan

Hay, the new chairman of the Parks Commission, which included recommendations to do away with a number of the older and sickly animals, demolish their cages and rebuild a modern new zoo elsewhere in the park.

But citing a postwar shortage of men and materials early in 1946, E.V. Buchanan announced that no new zoo would be built that year. The old bear pits and cages had been dismantled over the winter and the aging animals had been shot. Although some of the deer and birds were kept, the beavers finally met their end. The paving of Springbank’s neglected roads took precedence over animals that summer while officials continued to issue hopeful statements about a utopian zoo in the future – but nothing happened.

Although several types of animals and birds remained on view to the public, the elk herd became a memory in January of 1952. The last buck had died several years earlier, so Parks Superintendent Ted Foster got a man to shoot the remaining cows and take the carcasses away. Subsequently, the elk pasture was turned into three new picnic areas. By 1955 there were only a few monkeys and birds left at Springbank, but when a doe was rescued from the riverbank near the Ridout Street bridge, she was given a home at the zoo. Shortly after that, the Ontario Department of Lands and Forests donated a buck. As a result, a fawn was born to “Bambi” and “Rudolph” in 1956, followed by twins in 1957. However, city councillors criticized the sorry display provided by the remaining livestock which were housed in a few overgrown enclosures. The unkempt foliage prevented the public from seeing much of anything that was in them. Finally, the zoo’s tipping point had been reached.

In 1957, the PUC formed a new committee for the development of parks and recreational facilities. In order to get the first project under way, it reviewed information on “children’s fairylands” from Oakland and Montreal.

# Ferris Would Use Disputed \$185,000 To Establish Zoo, Improve Springbank

By LES SMITH

Free Press Staff Reporter

Use of a disputed hydro sinking fund of \$185,000 to establish a small zoo and to improve conditions generally at Springbank Park was urged today by Ald. Terry Ferris.

The fund is claimed both by the city and the PUC.

Municipal officials say it belongs to the city since investments by the treasurer built it up to its present level. The PUC has always carried the hydro money on its books.

J.T.D. May 30/57  
Ald. Ferris, who Monday

touched off a controversy over conditions at the park, said a small zoo housing native animals like bison, deer, and beavers, and typical Canadian birds is sorely needed.

He said, too, that there should be more amusements for children and suggested a "fantasy land" containing models depicting familiar nursery rhymes.

The alderman said: "It is obvious that my criticism struck home. I'm not perturbed about

the criticism handed me for what I said. The public would echo my statements."

Ald. Ferris said the present policy regarding concessions should be reconsidered and revenue from properly-run concessions would go a long way toward maintenance costs of a zoo.

"Improvements of this nature would reap dividends," he said. "perhaps not in dollars and cents, but in service to the public."

*The Free Press, May 30, 1957.*

When "Storybook Gardens" opened in June of 1958, some of the zoo's remaining animals were incorporated into its new displays. Fortunately, when fire destroyed the theme park's Old MacDonald's Barn early in 2015, all the animals escaped unharmed and were sent to appropriate shelters outside the city. One hundred years after the first raccoons had arrived at the zoo, London officially closed its last chapter on live animals at Springbank Park, although hundreds of Canada Geese continue to ignore the policy.

In 2016, a number of long-time Londoners were asked to recount their memories of the zoo. They all mentioned the bears and their distinctive odour. Several people described their cages with concrete floors, small pools, iron bars and wire on three sides, while the fourth side, at the rear, housed a dank, concrete room. Others recalled the colourful peacocks fanning their magnificent tails and emitting their raucous calls which echoed throughout the park. One man described his fascination with the owls that seemed to rotate their heads in a circle, and others loved watching the graceful deer.

Everyone spoke of their zoo experiences in connection with other activities at Springbank, for it has always been a popular destination which has provided the public with many recreational choices. Over the years there was an amusement park with various rides and booths, a dance pavilion, live outdoor theatre, extensive picnic and athletic grounds, pony rides, pedal boats, docking facilities for steam boats that brought passengers from downtown London, the street railway line, walking and running routes, a drinking fountain bubbling with odoriferous sulphur water, the carousel, a wading pool, many beautiful gardens, a skateboarding site, an ice skating area, and the ever-popular miniature train which has transported untold thousands of children, young and old, around its circular track.

Some of these attractions have come and gone, but each generation of visitors to Springbank Park savours what it has to offer. With the passing of time, Col. Leys' role in expanding the park's development has faded from memory, but when he proposed his idea for a zoo, he planted a seed that came to fruition and countless people were delighted by his legacy.

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## Endnotes

1. *The London Free Press*, July 21, 1902, p. 8.
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3. *The London Free Press*, Aug. 13, 1915, p. 3.
4. *Ibid*, Aug. 5, 1916, p. 2.
5. *The London Advertiser*, Aug. 21, 1916, p. 12; *The London Free Press*, Aug. 22, 1916, pp. 3 and 11.
6. *The London Advertiser*, Mar. 30, 1917, p. 3.
7. *The London Free Press*, June 5, 1918, p. 2.
8. *Ibid*, Feb. 26, 1919, p. 2.
9. *Ibid*, May 18, 1920, p. 18.
10. *The London Advertiser*, March 4, 1921, p. 4.
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15. *Ibid*, Nov. 1, 1927, p. 2.
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17. *The London Advertiser*, Dec. 20, 1934, p. 1.
18. *Ibid*, Sept. 2, 1936, p. 12.
19. *The London Free Press*, May 20, 1940, p. 2.