

The Zoo in Riverview Park, North Side,
Pittsburgh, Pa.



A period postcard depicts the Riverview Park zoo, which operated from about 1898-1910 in Allegheny City, now Pittsburgh's North Side.

Pittsburgh's Other Zoos

BY MELANIE LINN GUTOWSKI

The Pittsburgh Zoo and PPG Aquarium is a favorite spot of western Pennsylvanians and visitors alike. Prior to its 1898 founding as the Highland Park Zoological Gardens by state senator and philanthropist Christopher L. Magee, the Greater Pittsburgh area was home to several other animal parks.

Perhaps the earliest of Pittsburgh's zoos was the Castle Shannon Zoological Gardens. This was a privately owned animal park constructed by the Pittsburgh & Castle Shannon Railroad as a means to attract more riders. Creating railside amusements was a common advertising tactic of the period, just as roadside attractions are today. Its grand opening on Memorial Day 1876 attracted nearly 3,000 visitors. By August of that year, the gardens boasted about a hundred species of animals, including birds. However, the zoological gardens were short-lived. By 1880, the railroad was placed in receivership and lost hundreds of acres of land, including those housing the zoo.

Across the Allegheny River in what is today the city's North Side, Allegheny City had a modest zoo in Riverview Park. In addition to small native animals, the grounds also featured a bear pit, an aviary—

dubbed a "flying cage"—and paddocks for deer, elk and zebu, a species of Asian cattle. Riverview Park's zoo lasted for about 12 years, closing in 1910 due to the overwhelming popularity of the Highland Park zoo.

Perhaps the biggest and best-known of the area's early zoos was the Schenley Park Zoo, established shortly after the founding of the park in 1889. According to historian Rachel Colker, it's unlikely that the zoo's 300 animals were purchased; the collection was a combination of donations from local farmers and trappers as well as "rescues" from the circus. A period history volume recounts that children "divided their sweetmeats with the monkeys while attending picnics on the grounds." Another favorite resident was Gusky, an Asian elephant who was brought to town by the Gusky family as an advertising stunt for their downtown department store. She was later transferred to Highland Park when the Schenley Park Zoo closed in 1898. ■

Melanie Linn Gutowski is a local historian and the author of "Pittsburgh's Mansions."

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