

## *Lakewood Farm: the Farm that was a Zoo*

Geoffrey D. Reynolds

### George F. Getz Family

George Fulmer Getz, a penniless, but ambitious farm boy from Mechanicsburg, Pennsylvania, came to Chicago in 1878, at age 15, to make his fortune. He was the youngest of 13 children and stayed with his older brother Harry and his wife. His business skills and daring enabled him to rise from the position of a simple messenger boy for the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad to owner of the Globe Corporation in 1901, the largest wholesale coal supplier in the Midwest. A man who knew American presidents and industrial tycoons, sports celebrities and stars of the entertainment world, Getz was equally comfortable with thousands of common folk who called him friend.

Getz first came to Holland, Michigan, in 1910 to find property for a country home for his wife, Susan Rankin

Getz, and their growing family—then made up of only George, Jr. and soon to be delivered son James—to spend weekends and summers. He envisioned an estate with stables, vegetable gardens, fruit orchards, and broad fields for their children to play in. That spot, to be known as Lakewood, was located on Holland's north side, situated on the shore of Lake Michigan, and paid for in August 1910. Getz was quoted as saying, "The decision to buy the land was my wife's." Somehow she saw in the 70 acres of barren land, purchased from Miss Ida F. Fay and made impassable by thick undergrowth and trees, a future lakeside showplace. And

she was right. Unfortunately, she passed away later that summer giving birth to James, and never got to see George's creation—one of America's largest and finest private zoos. At the death of his wife, Getz moved Harry and his wife into a large hotel suite, along with his own two boys George, Jr. and James. Aunt Nellie served as their caregiver for most of their young lives and continued to do so after Harry's death in 1919.



*George F. Getz*

### Formation of Getz Farm

After the death of his wife, George Getz spent virtually no time in Holland until the summer of 1911, when local papers recorded that he had been involved in an automobile/horse and buggy accident on the Alpena Beach Road. The horse was killed, but the driver survived. This narrow, unpaved stretch of road was named in honor of the ill-fated steamboat that sunk off Holland's shores in October

1880. Getz's estate, which would be later known as Lakewood Farm, was at the western end of that road.

Getz's fondness of animals did not come from his early years on a farm in Pennsylvania. Instead, it came from the gift of a monkey received from an Egyptian houseboy he met while recovering from a nervous breakdown in Cairo in 1900. With this playful gift, Getz dreamed of collecting wild animals and making them available to the public. That dream came true in 1913 when he purchased an additional 64 acres of land

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## From the Director



The story in this issue of the *Quarterly*, Lakewood Farm: The Farm That Was a Zoo, is very appropriate for a summer issue, because the farm was open only during the summers and became a favorite summer destination. The story came about from my need to share the history of this interesting place—its visitors and guests, and the family that built, maintained and owned it—with

civic groups eager to hear something new. Donald van Reken's wonderful book of the same title inspired me to write my own shorter version for groups and for quick reading. I hope that you enjoy reading it as much as I did writing it.

Geoffrey D. Reynolds

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*Lakewood Farm (continued from page 1)*



*Map of Lakewood Farm, c. 1916*

from Hyo Bos and Abraham Peters. Later, he would purchase even more land from Gerrit W. Kooyers, bringing the total to 253 acres. Much of it was landscaped with fruit trees, floral displays, and buildings housing his growing livestock collection.

The collection began with poultry that was exhibited at local fairs and poultry shows in Holland. It was at these fairs and shows that his larger animals began to appear and included Toulouse geese, pheasants, a sun bear from Japan, monkeys from Madagascar, camels and stallions from Arabia, donkeys from Israel, dogs from Europe, raccoons, black bear and dogfaced baboons. The planned addition of an elephant to the collection that year failed when the elephant died on the ship during transport, but its shipmates, the donkeys and camels, survived the trip from Israel. Other animals were



*Kit, the leopard*

acquired from the Fletcher-Fowler Company sideshow. They included a red fox, an eagle, two wildcats, a leopard, a badger, two coyotes and five monkeys.

As the collection grew, Getz continued to host large gatherings at Lakewood Farm for his friends and influential associates from around the nation. Eventually, this generosity was extended to local Hollanders during Fourth of July celebrations. His guests were taken care of not only by Getz, but by his growing staff as well. The professionally trained John W. Clarke oversaw the floral operations, Gerrit Beelen the fruit displays, and M. H. Caesar the 10,000 pigeons and 10,000 other fowl. A. M. Petersen would eventually become head of the animals.



*George Getz, Jr. chasing the chickens*

While Lakewood Farm had been seen as a great place to visit with an invitation, it wasn't until 1915 that Getz made an open invitation to the general public to come and visit his farm and emerging zoo, free of charge. It was also the beginning of the movement to have the Alpena Beach Road paved—at least part way—to help bring more people to him, and his money to Holland. The road was completed in 1923, through slow and methodic spending on the part of the county, Getz, and resorters from Ottawa Beach and Waukazoo.



*Lakewood Farm employees*

Getz continued to develop Lakewood Farm into a commercial, money-making operation that hatched 18,000 White Leghorn or Wyandotte chicks every three weeks. This volume of production at the farm led him to build even more buildings to house staff members, like the sixteen-person single men's dormitory in 1916, which included a reading room, pool room, and bowling alley. He also furnished at least six individual houses for the married men on staff and their families. Lakewood School, for local children and his two sons, was constructed as well.



*Lakewood Schoolhouse, c. 1914*  
*Miss Ann Webster, teacher*

As the commercial part of Lakewood Farm continued to grow, so did the exotic animal collection. By 1916, Getz had added a long-armed baboon, rhesus monkeys, some Pekin ducks, lemur monkeys and ring-tailed monkeys, odorless skunks, Java monkeys, Rocky Mountain goats, an anteater, ocelot, white rats, prairie dogs, beaver and two bald eagles. Getz gave most of this growing zoo collection away in 1917 and 1918 in an effort to conserve needed supplies and manpower for the war effort that America was close to entering. The larger animals were given to the Lincoln Park Zoo in Chicago and the smaller to John Ball Zoo in nearby Grand Rapids.

### Off to War

As Getz reduced the size of his zoo, he increased the amount of his financial support for the Red Cross and war bond drives. In 1918, he was worth close to a million dollars, but making and giving money away to the war effort was not enough. In November of that year, the 54-year-old Getz enlisted in the American Red Cross and was appointed head of the Belgium zone with the rank of major. He returned to Chicago in February 1919 to resume the running of the Globe Corporation.

### The Zoo Grows Again



By 1922, Getz was back to socializing on a grand scale, with over 5,500 Hollanders—including every merchant and ex-servicemen—attending his well-known Fourth of July party.

In 1925, Getz and his two sons embarked on a “round-the-world” cruise. Upon their return in April 1926, they were accompanied by

a young orangutan. Other animals they had purchased were delivered over a period of time and included Nancy, the elephant, 29 monkeys, 2 tapirs, two 28-



foot pythons, kangaroos, a lion, bears, jaguar, 2 tigers, 2 black panthers, ocelot, 2 leopards, and another orangutan, this one full-grown. Getz's representatives were in place along the travel route to care for and forward the animals to their next stop. The major development of a zoo at Lakewood Farm was now underway.

Getz's political friendships also continued to grow as more and more politicians and powerful businessmen began staying at the increasing number of private cottages at the farm. During the summer of 1926, four of the cottages—Shoreview, Sunset, Lakeview and Beachview—were each occupied by families of New York governor Alfred E. Smith, Gerrit Diekema, William Alden Smith and Arthur Vandenberg. In July, Getz threw a party for Michigan gubernatorial candidate



*Autos lined up at Lakewood Farm, c. late-1920s*

Fred Green, and all of western Michigan was invited. In the end, 30,000 people—3,000 from Green’s hometown of Ionia alone—had been entertained and fed. This event

sparked the storm of visitors that would visit Lakewood Farm for years to come. An estimated 800,000 visited during the summer of 1926.

In 1927, the zoo grew and more animals, like Big Bill, the American bison, were added. Getz took a two-month, African continent tour with his son George and a few other corporate capitalists. During his absence, staff members remodeled the gardens and enlarged the zoo. The changes included a new central heating plant for the farm, coal house, monkey house, and new cages and houses for the animals yet to come. In January 1929, the citizens of Holland were treated to free film showings of Getz’s African safari, created from his adventure.



*George Getz and guests at the big house*

Getz was also a keen prize fight supporter and even co-promoted the famous 1927 Gene Tunney-Jack Dempsey “Long Count” prize fight at Chicago’s Soldier Field. Those interests also led him to become the Illinois state boxing commissioner a few years later.

In 1930, the waterfowl lagoon, equipped with fountains and a small bridge and island, was added for the ducks, wild geese and white and black swans. This was also the year that Getz hosted Jack Dempsey at the farm while he trained.

By 1931, over one hundred monkeys of 48 varieties could be seen at the zoo.

### Animal Highlights

The collection of animals eventually grew to 141 mammals, 201 birds and 15 reptiles. Many of the animals acquired came with unusual histories, like Sally, the chimpanzee. She



was acquired by Getz from the Ziegfeld Follies for \$2,000 in 1928, after she had bitten the leg of a small girl during a show. She entertained park visitors with her daily roller skating exploits,

took her food with the use of silverware, and rode her tricycle. In later years, while at the Brookfield Zoo, she gave birth to their first baby chimpanzee and enjoyed other domestic activities like sweeping up her own cage while smoking a cigarette. She enjoyed each one to the last puff.

Nancy, the four-ton elephant, came to the zoo in 1926, and was named by local photographer Arthur Sas in a contest that netted him \$5.00. That same year, Wilma Por gave Toodles, the rhinoceros, its name.



Ri-Ri, the lion, was born on the farm in March 1932, along with another cub. Since their mother wanted nothing to do with them, they were taken to a C h i c a g o

hospital to be raised by Dr. A. R. Metz, a friend of Getz. Ri-Ri’s sibling died en route, but she survived and was taken back to Lakewood Farm in June, weighing just ten pounds. Four other Lakewood lions, born in July of that year, were raised by a spaniel named Daisy, while a farm cat raised her new litter of puppies.

## The Beginning of the End

During the autumn of 1931, Getz was interviewed by *The Michigan Tradesman* about his life. In the interview, Getz remarked that he had offered to sell Lakewood Farm to the State of Michigan for \$625,000, payable over 20 years, but they had declined. He also mentioned that he would start charging a fee to visit Lakewood Farm in 1932: 25 cents for adults and 10 cents for children. This was the first time that any visitor was asked to pay for entrance to his estate. The reason given by Getz was the need to offset the cost of caring for the animals and paying staff members. This change in policy might have also been his way of showing the State of Michigan officials that the zoo could be operated economically. Admissions during the first weekend of 1932 raised \$1,800.



*Lawn and pond at Lakewood Farm*

The final blow to the precarious existence of the zoo came on July 23, 1933, when a violent and devastating storm ripped through the farm, causing \$15,000 in damage to buildings, but left the animals unharmed. Not long after the storm damage was assessed, Getz began sale talks with the Chicago Zoological Foundation for his animals to be placed in the newly created Brookfield Zoo that was due to open in mid-1934. They, like the state of Michigan, could not afford the price he was asking and declined. Getz would later donate the animals to the Brookfield Zoo.

After the final Labor Day weekend in 1933, statistics showed that during the previous summer, visitors from 46 states, plus Alaska, Canada, Nova Scotia, Belgium, Scotland, Denmark, Mexico and the Netherlands had come to Lakewood Farm.

## Disbanding the Zoo

The end for Getz's zoo came on Friday, October 20, 1933, when he closed the attraction for good. This national treasure, which had entertained thousands of visitors since before the First World War, was costing Getz too much money.

In November, 143 animals, 123 birds, and 15 reptiles were transported to the new zoo via trucks. Nancy, the elephant, traveled in a specially-built trailer, camouflaged with leafy boughs, until she was safely aboard and hooked up to a tractor. Law enforcement officials from Michigan, Indiana, and Illinois were involved in their safe passage to the suburban zoo. Ri-Ri, the lion, had to be calmed with ether during the move. Along with the animals went four of the farm's best keepers: twins Marvin and Morris Ryzenga, and brothers Fred and Leroy Woodruff. All four would train the Chicago staff, mostly made up of neighborhood men who had worked on farms.



*Polar bear at the Lakewood Farm Zoo*

## Getz Family after the Zoo

The senior Getz passed away in February 1938, at the age of 72. The Globe Corporation was then headed by his son George, who moved the company into the manufacturing of sailplanes, target drones for the military, pleasure boats, motor scooters, other products and real estate. The Getz family still owns the Globe Corporation, which continues to grow today as a diversified investment company, concentrating on real estate, asset management and private equity, building on the idea that it is more than a capital source.

In 1939, Lakewood Farm passed from the Getz family to the Trust Company of Chicago. It was further subdivided into many lots in 1940. Isaac Kouw of Holland was in charge of the subdividing and selling the lots. The Vandenberg family of Holland owned the estate for many years until selling it to current owners, Ken and Patti Bing of Zeeland. Presently, they are involved in a major renovation of the main house and were recently featured on the Home and Garden Television channel program, "If Walls Could Talk."

*Photos from the Don van Reken collection at the Joint Archives of Holland.*

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*George Getz leading friends on camels at Lakewood Farm*