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Notes from the Archive

Seaver Center for Western History Research
Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County
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THE COLLECTION

The California Alligator Farm Collection, ca. 1920s - 1940s

A small photograph collection showing kids and other visitors riding on alligators and ostriches came to the museum through Marjorie L. Eade in 1988. According to Marjorie, her grandfather Francis Earnest established the alligator farm in 1906. He traveled to Louisiana and Mississippi to collect and stock the farm, including "Billy" out of Lake Pontchartrain, Louisiana, who became the docile, charismatic star of the farm. This newsletter features former staff member Julie McAdam to reveal her connection to the farm.

Exotic Los Angeles

Animals were once imported into many parts of Los Angeles to support new industries and provide amusement for the locals and tourists. A cluster of live animal venues developed in former East Los Angeles (today's Lincoln Heights). Anchored by Eastlake Park, now known as Lincoln Park, at a stretch along Mission Road there began an ostrich farm and an Indian village in 1907 and soon an alligator farm, too - there are differing opening years on record for the alligator farm.

Then a zoo built by movie pioneer William Selig opened in 1915 that maintained a wide assortment of animals to support motion picture production. Today a street named Selig Place is a vestige of the former zoo.

The development of these were part of promoting Los Angeles as an exotic place of sunshine, health, and a new beginning—as well as real estate.



Two-year old Marjorie riding Pontchartrain Billy, June 20, 1939

(P-9 A. 11165.88-9)

Earlier ostrich farms operated in southern California, such as Cawston's starting in the 1880s with birds from South Africa. The farms provided decades of profitable feather harvests supplied to the New York fashion district in the manufacture of dyed plumes, boas, fans and stoles. Costly feather and alligator hide products were featured in the gift stores of the various farms.



(P-9 A. 11165.88-3)

Alligator Fascination

Alligator sightseeing developed after the Civil War with steamboat waterway traffic between Savannah, Georgia and the Jacksonville, Florida region. By 1893 the first alligator farm, exhibit, museum and souvenir shop was established near St. Augustine.

In Los Angeles the newspaper reported an occasional alligator captured and brought to the city for public viewing. In 1899 the city park commission ordered two alligators purchased for display at Westlake (today's MacArthur Park). The commission was also amenable to an offer by a local German bird merchant to stock Eastlake with his animals in order to advertise his business.

THE RESEARCHER

Julie McAdam and the California Alligator Farm



Julie McAdam served as Manager of Volunteer Programs for 15 years before retiring in June. She started at the Natural History Museum and then took her expertise to the La Brea Tar Pits for the last eight years. Julie's Aunt Eva married into the Earnest family. In previous years, Julie visited the Seaver Center to study the family photographs.

After the farm got its footing, Francis Earnest soon acquired the share held by his business partner, "Alligator Joe" Campbell. Francis and his wife Gladys held onto the farm long enough that their son Frank, Jr., eventually took over the reins.

The *Overland Monthly* published a lengthy piece in December, 1910 referring to the California Alligator Ranch. Included were some hyperbolic details on noteworthy residents, including Pontchartrain Billy, 220 pounds, about 80 years old, captured April 1907; El Diablo, 150 years old; and the grand patriarch, Louisiana Joe, 200 years old. Interestingly, the article mentioned a large Floridan gator, too, formerly kept at Westlake Park and presented to the farm in November, 1908.



From the Seaver Center collections

The place was occasionally miswritten as the Los Angeles Alligator Farm. Its official address was 3627 Mission Road, but ads in the early years simply directed visitors to "Mission Road near Eastlake Park." Sometime in the mid-1920s the Earnests took over the neighboring Los Angeles Ostrich Farm at 3609 Mission Road. When feathers became outmoded as the 1930s fashions changed, the market dwindled. But the ostrich attractions hung on until 1953. In that year Julie's Uncle Frank and Aunt Eva moved the alligator farm to Orange County.

Surely it was a calculated move - Walt Disney was already negotiating land in Buena Park. Knotts Berry Farm had been operating for several decades. The alligator farm operated at La Palma and Beach Boulevards until closing in 1984.

The California Alligator Farm held a unique distinction in its longevity, first operating along an early tourist row on Mission Road in the city of Los Angeles. The second generation under the leadership of Frank, Jr., made a smart decision to resettle in the new post-World War II theme-park row along Beach Boulevard in the OC.



Image courtesy of Julie McAdam

Julie pointed out in the picture above of her mother Anne, father Earl and the kids (left to right her sister Sandie, a friend and Julie), they sat atop "Billy," probably the most famous alligator. She explained that "Billy" was in a lot of movies as were other alligators from the farm, including King Solomon's Mines (1950), Africa Screams with Abbott and Costello (1949), Disney's Bayou Boy (1971), and The Happiest Millionaire (1967). TV appearances included Leave It to Beaver, Sheriff John, and Gidget.

Julie shared some of her fond childhood memories:

I grew up about five minutes from the Alligator Farm in Lincoln Heights and we were there a lot; but I was pretty young and mostly liked the merry go round next to the Farm. We visited the Alligator Farm in Buena Park often (sometimes weekly) because my Grandma and Grandpa lived a few blocks from my house and we took them to visit the Alligator Farm once it was moved to Buena Park. I have pictures of my Grandpa feeding and working with the alligators.

My sister, brother and I loved visiting my cousins Kenny and Karen Earnest, but also other cousins who came to see my grandparents when we were there. A lot of cousins could mean a lot of mischief and a lot of fun.

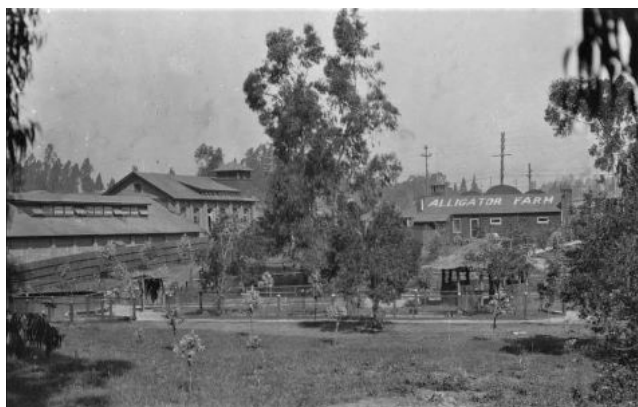
Perhaps the Alligator Farm is where I first explored the world of interpretation. When I was young, we got to bring home a baby alligator to take to school for show and tell each year...until someone (not saying who) let the alligator out of the cardboard box he was supposed to stay in. My mother was not happy, and when we found the alligator, my dad had to drive it back to the Farm that night. No more alligators at show and tell; from then on it was an ostrich egg.

At the Alligator Farm, I loved the shows. There was a big wooden slide the alligators would climb up and slide down, my cousin Kenny was often the presenter. He also did a show with iguanas and snakes that was pretty amazing, but the best part was getting to watch him feed the snakes behind the scenes in the snake house. My cousin Kenny let us touch and hold some of the snakes, but we were not allowed to go back there with Kenny unless my Dad went with us.

My cousins not only had alligators, crocodiles, snakes, iguanas, ostriches, a tortoise named Humpy and the flamingos, but they had pets too. They had a big black Great Dane named "Tiny." "Tiny" loved to wear sun glasses or a hat and strut around the Farm; of course, "Tiny" let us kids tag along. My cousin Karen had a monkey named "Coco." "Coco" wore cute baby's clothes and always sat on Karen's shoulder. Another pet monkey, "Dinki" sometimes was left at home. One day, "Dinki" escaped from his cage and explored the kitchen. When my Uncle and Aunt got home that night, "Dinki" was covered from head to toe in flour. "Dinki" seemed pretty pleased he had managed to get out pots, pans and all kinds of food. The pictures were really funny, but not what anyone would want to come home to at the end of a long day.

Thank you for the memories, Julie.

Betty Uyeda, Collections Manager



Circa 1929 (GPF.8696)

Images of the California Alligator Farm are also found in other Seaver Center collections.
Visit the [Digitized Collections](#) to search.

Both an ostrich and an egg are featured in the Becoming Los Angeles Exhibition.



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The collections are a part of the History Department of the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County.

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