
Dr. Wegeforth's dream realized; Society celebrates 25th anniversary

This announcement explains how Thompson became involved with the San Diego Zoological Society.

October 19, 1941, San Diego Union, B-1:5.

Dr. Wegeforth's dream realized; Society celebrates 25th anniversary, by Ruth Taunton.

The San Diego Zoological Society is celebrating its 25th anniversary this week.

In those 25 years the society has grown from the desire of a few San Diegans to give better care to a few miserable animals in Balboa Park into the custodianship of one of the world's most famous zoological gardens, with 3,000 fine exhibits housed in a \$4,000,000 plant.

Because it was his idea from the beginning, the late Dr. Harry Wegeforth was the "head and heart" of the San Diego zoo from the October day in 1916 when he first discussed the project with a handful of friends until his death last summer.

Single-handedly, Dr. Wegeforth raised thousands of dollars in the early days, and after he retired from general medical practice because of ill health, he generously squandered the strength left to him by traveling to remote corners of the earth in search of many of the rare animals which one finds in the zoo today.

But the zoo was not built on magic, Dr. Wegeforth often reminded visitors.

When the thought was merely to see what could be done to relieve the unhappiness of some improperly fed, scraggly-looking deer, buffalo and bears that had been left stranded in the park after the 1915 [sic] exposition, it was a fight to get enough to de-louse and feed them.

By 1917, however, Dr. Wegeforth wanted to branch out. A few owners of "animal acts" were looking for good winter quarters for their lions and other cats, and were only too glad to lend them as exhibits in exchange for room and board.

So the physician managed to persuade public-spirited citizens to help him finance suitable wire for cages, which he strung along Park Boulevard, across the street from the Indian Village Boy Scout headquarters.

Sometimes not knowing where tomorrow's hay for the elephants or meat for the lions was coming from, but always holding to a vision that was growing beyond recognition, Dr. Wegeforth's enthusiasm did not abate.

The Union, which in 1916 had carried the story of a physician's concern for neglected animals, began to publish the details of the same physician's rather odd ambition to start a zoo.

The response to The Union's stories was so gratifying, Dr. Wegeforth commented on the results in a carefully kept diary which the society hopes to publish. It was the first newspaper publicity that brought to the physician's aid such kindred spirits as Dr. Fred Baker, San Diego pioneer, and Dr. J. C. Thompson, U.S.N., now retired.

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Source: <http://www.sandiegohistory.org/amero/notes-1941.htm>

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