

Marlin Perkins' Zooparade

By Dennis Payton Knight

Zooparade, one of our television memories of the 1950s, was broadcast live with the tall, mustachioed Marlin Perkins appearing in a business suit kanoodling with reptiles, monkeys, ferocious felines, cuddly bear cubs and other creatures at Chicago's Lincoln Park Zoo. If the suit was out of place, it was just a sign of those stuffy times; he was, after all, the zoo's director.

It was Perkins who gave *Zooparade* its blended, one-word name. That I learned from a Los Angeles Times obituary, not from Wikipedia, Biography.com or other sources. I confirmed it with two sources: a book by Perkins under the title *Zooparade*, and a copy of a note in his handwriting. It was an invitation to friends to celebrate their fiftieth wedding anniversary by watching *Zooparade* and be introduced to sea turtles who might have been married even longer.

Perkins voice was reedy, and his delivery strained for a fellow conversing with gorillas in pinstripes. Pinstripes on Perkins, that is. In 1955, Perkins broke out of the studio and ventured to Africa to catch in action some freedom-loving cousins of his Lincoln Park menagerie. And then he seemed to discover freedom for himself. The pinstripes came off, the safari shirt was donned, and he even lost the necktie.

Marlin Perkins grew up handling and learning about insects and reptiles unearthed by plows on the family farm. He briefly studied zoology at the University of Missouri, then in 1926 he went to work as a sweeper at the St. Louis Zoo; within two weeks he was handling the reptiles, and two years later he became the zoo's reptile curator.

In 1938 he became curator of the zoo in Buffalo New York, and in 1944 he became director at the Lincoln Park Zoo in Chicago where he started his television show. After NBC canceled *Zooparade* in 1957, he continued as director at Lincoln Park, and joined Sir Edmund Hillary's 1970 Everest expedition in which he investigated the existence of Yeti. Perkins debunked the myth, showing reported footprints were those of smaller animals such as foxes that had melted together in the sun, making them look grossly larger, but not the tracks of an Abominable Snowman.

In 1963, Marlin Perkins returned to his beginnings and became the Director of the St. Louis Zoo. His contract permitted him to host the popular Wild Kingdom television series with wildlife adventures around the world, joined primarily by Jim Fowler but sometimes Stan Brock and Peter Gros. Fowler, usually, would face thrilling danger on camera, while Perkins narrated, giving comics the line that Fowler did all the work while Perkins stayed in the jeep. But Marlin was very involved in the action and there are hours of footage still available on the internet proving so. For a thrilling sample, I recommend Marlin Perkins and Stan Brock wrestling the anaconda--a long, powerful, writhing, crushing anaconda that will have you squirming and twisting for escape from your deep, comfortable La-Z-Boy.