

## Remembering the Old Elitch Gardens

*By Dennis Payton Knight*

“If you haven’t seen Elitch’s, you haven’t seen Denver.” That slogan was spelled out in a colorful floral display inside the entrance to Elitch Gardens at 38<sup>th</sup> and Tennyson. It epitomized the beauty and tranquility that existed incongruously below screaming roller coasters and the heart-stopping rides of the popular amusement park in the Highlands neighborhood. That is, it did until 1995 when they moved everything but the trees, gardens and beauty downtown to a new, stark, cement version of itself.

John and Mary Elitch bought farmland and opened their park in 1880 as the first zoological gardens west of Chicago. P.T. Barnum donated some of the animals, and one of the bears was famous for dancing a waltz when the band played. After John died in 1881, Mary ran it alone for twenty-six years, the first woman ever to own and manage a zoo.

The Elitch Theatre opened there in 1890, home to what would eventually become the country’s oldest summer stock theatre, until it finally closed in 1991. With management paying New York scale, notable performers such as Grace Kelly, Douglas Fairbanks and Edward G. Robinson often took to the stage. A Denver girl nicknamed “Tony” was eleven when she debuted, and she grew up to be the Broadway producer Antoinette Perry, for whom the Tony Awards are named. Today, the building has been restored, and productions are being staged there again.

In 1916 Mary Elitch sold the park to John Mulvihill with the provision the name would never change. New attractions soon appeared, including the fabulous Trocadero Ballroom in 1917. The Twister roller coaster came along in 1922, and a carousel was added in 1928. Zoo operations were discontinued in the 1930’s, yielding space to more of the formal gardens and additional rides. A giant floral clock was planted, and bands like Benny Goodman’s and the Dorsey Brothers’ swung at the Trocadero.

When Mulvihill died in 1930, ownership went to son-in-law Arnold Gurtler, whose family operated the park even after it moved in 1995.

Thousands of students danced at the Troc and worked at Elitch’s. Many of them today are likely to be our neighbors at Windsor Gardens, and I’d be interested in hearing their stories.

As children, our family came annually from Laramie to enjoy the kiddy rides and the big-kid thrills, too, but my memories are of the gardens and not the rides. Later, I moved to Denver, took my own family to the park often, and have one prideful, final link to the place.

I was there in September, 1994, when my son Thomas and his bandmates from Horizon High School were honored to be the last band to ever play at the venerable old park. As they ended their performance, a sudden, driving storm with hail the size of ice cubes drove them and the crowd to cover. Her partner Mother Nature had bidden goodbye, and our old Elitch Gardens closed her lovely gates forever.