

## *The Chimp Farm\**

BETSY SWART

As we paid our \$2.25 and walked into Noell's Ark - the Chimp Farm -we passed a woman with three small children. They were standing in front of a barren concrete cage, staring at the lonely chimp inside.

'Hey, you,' yelled one of the children to the chimp. 'Want a peanut? Then DO something.'

'Can't you dance?' yelled another.

The kids giggled and jumped up and down - mimicking chimpanzee movements. But the chimp inside the cage remained silent. He just rocked quietly back and forth - hitting his head very softly against the concrete cage wall. His was a posture of total despair and loneliness.

The woman was about to take her children on a tour of the Farm. I wondered why she would expose her children to such sadness.

'Do you think the animals are happy?' we asked her, gesturing to the long rows of cages containing chimps, monkeys and other animals.

'Oh, of *course*, they're happy,' she said to me disdainfully. 'What kind of question is that? They're only animals.'

Then she and the children began their tour, past the long, desolate rows of pitiful cages.

Noell's Ark is one of the USA's most notorious roadside zoos. It is owned and presided over by Bob and Mae Noell. The couple got their 'show business' start on the vaudeville stage but soon decided that other sorts of entertainment would be more lucrative for them.

In 1939, they attended the World's Fair. And it was there that Bob first got the idea of using animals in their 'act', which in those days was a travelling medicine show catering to rural eastern and southern populations. Soon after the Fair, he bought a gorilla from a dealer and travelled around the country with this new 'member' of their family. The gorilla was a crowd-pleaser, especially after Bob latched on to the idea of having the gorilla 'box' with humans.

Bob and Mae realised they had a hit on their hands. They began acquiring other animals and eventually breeding them.

Soon they expanded the boxing matches to include chimps as well and travelled around the country pocketing a pretty penny from these make-believe bouts. The chimps they used as 'boxers' were, of course, chained and harnessed and otherwise restrained. But many a human 'he-man' would put his money down to try his strength against a chimpanzee – especially when he knew he couldn't lose.

The Noells' travelling days are over now. But the animals which they acquired during their working years – and many, many more – reside in a roadside concrete jungle near Tarpon Springs, Florida. The Chimp Farm is visited by hundreds of tourists each year. Bob and Mae proudly greet visitors and collect admission fees at the door.

The entrance to the Chimp Farm has a carnival-like appearance with huge signs announcing

---

\* In PAOLA CAVALIERI & PETER SINGER (eds.), *The Great Ape Project* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 1993), pp. 291-295.

'REAL LIVE' chimps, gorillas and alligators. There are even cartoon-like plywood cut-outs of various animals outside the Farm's main entrance. Tourists are encouraged to put their faces in the cut-out holes where animal faces would be and then have their pictures taken. 'See how *you* would look as a gorilla,' one of the staff calls out to a child climbing up the exhibit.

The same carnival-like attitude toward animals is encouraged on the inside of the Chimp Farm as well. Food in the form of monkey chow and nuts is available at the front desk or through bubble-gum dispensers. People are encouraged to feed the animals. Unfortunately, most feed them anything that they can manage to pitch into the cages and the bored and stressed animals accept the food gladly. There are a few signs posted on the premises to limit tourists' aggressive behaviour, but neither the Noells nor their staff keep a watchful eye out for the animals' health or safety.

During my two visits, I saw tourists give the animals gum, candy, cookies, Coke and even cigarettes.

But it is easy to see why these 'treats' are welcomed by the animals. They live in the most barren and squalid conditions imaginable. They have nothing to play with — except perhaps their own faeces. Their cages are bare concrete and they are not allowed anything that would interfere with the Noells' clean-up operations, which consist merely of hosing down the cages with the animals inside.

Even a local grocer who offered to donate fruits and vegetables to the animals was refused because these foods make a 'mess' and were deemed inappropriate by the Noells. Except for an occasional tyre hanging from a cage top, there are no psychological enhancements in the cages. Space is minimal. The only animals who are housed together are those the Noells hope to breed. There is no room to exercise for any of the animals; there is no bedding to sleep on; and, in some cases, there is only minimal shelter from the weather.

As I walked along the concrete paths on my tour, I tried to piece together the different animals' histories.

At the entrance to the Farm — as though to entice visitors inside — is a baby chimp in a plexiglass and plywood box. A sign taped to the plexiglass cage proclaims that this baby is the fifty-eighth baby chimp born at the Noells' facility.

The baby spends his day pacing and banging on the walls of his prison. Sometimes he will put his head against the plexiglass, attempting to touch the head of a child on the outside. He is apparently asking for help and companionship that he will never get.

To make things worse, he has nothing to play with except two small worn pieces of carpet. Mae Noell told me that he is 'exercised by a volunteer when one is available'.

But the exercise room was barely larger than the cage.

She also told us that they are proud of their success in breeding animals on the farm. The babies attract visitors, she said. When we asked where the babies go when they are no longer infants, we got the expected answer. Sometimes, she said, it is necessary to sell the babies to provide funds for the upkeep on the rest of the farm.

Who buys the animals? Circuses, zoos and research laboratories.

Further along the walkway is a barren cage containing a chimp named Konga. He was born in 1948 and was one of the Noells' original boxing chimps. In fact, he still has the unremovable chain around his neck to prove it.

He looks old and tired and forlorn, his face wrinkled with age, weather and stress. He begs to tourists as they pass, extending both arms outside the bars in the hope of catching a piece of monkey chow.

Next door there is Johnnie. The sign in front of his cage says he was a former 'show chimp' and that someone has taught him to speak. He very clearly enunciates the syllables 'MaMa' as he extends his hand for a peanut from a passerby.

Then he retreats again to the back of his cage where he sits and rocks endlessly, his eyes fixed perhaps on another world.

Rosie, a former 'pet', is a weary witness to what happens when an exotic animal outgrows a domestic setting. She was once someone's 'baby'. Now she is a prisoner in a dirty cell.

Chimps like Rosie often spend twenty or thirty years in solitary confinement with not one bit of mental stimulation or the touch of another being - simply because they have outgrown the age when they can be safe and cuddly human companions. Rosie's eyes tell the story of pain and loss beyond words.

As pitiful as these animals' conditions are, they are among the most presentable of the animals at the Chimp Farm. They are housed nearest the front of the facility and permitted the closest interaction with the public.

Other animals, such as Cheetah, who, the Noells claim, once performed with Johnny Weismuller of Tarzan fame, have gone insane from confinement. They are hidden from the public by opaque plastic screens. All the public can see are shadows of animals pacing endlessly back and forth.

At the back of the farm, isolated from the public by a chain-link fence, several yards of space, and high cage bars, sit several other chimps whom the Noells consider only semi-respectable. Some are evidently insane — like Mike who was acquired from a dealer and reputedly came from an especially noxious laboratory experiment. Others are aggressive and throw faeces and food at passers-by.

Some just pace and bite themselves or rattle their cage bars. One chimp simply curls up in a foetal position and no amount of public clamour can elicit a response. She even lies there as they pelt her with food and yell insults. Her eyes are open and she is awake. But she is no longer listening.

These are just a few of the pitiful animals who are imprisoned on the Chimp Farm. Others include baboons, orang-utans, several species of monkey, gorillas, pigs and a huge bear whose cage size is in blatant defiance of both state and federal statutes.

He, and all the others, are doomed to live out the rest of their natural lives in confinement and misery.

The Chimp Farm is just one of several hundred roadside zoos across the United States.

As we were leaving the Chimp Farm, the woman we had talked to earlier in the day approached us again. I thought we were in for another lecture. Instead, she gave us a slightly embarrassed look.

'You know, you were right,' she said. 'These animals aren't happy. They look like mental patients. I won't be coming back.'

As she drove away, I thought that we were just one step closer to the day when everyone would see these places for the pitiful prisons they are.