

Animals of the World in a Fairlee, Vt., Backyard

By LAURA JEAN WHITCOMB

Photography by COLLAMER ABBOTT

A visit to the Rare Bird and Animal Farm was a childhood experience few children would forget. After waiting impatiently for their parents to purchase a ticket, they'd dash from the admission window to the otter tank. On their way to the big barn and animal pens, they'd be waylaid by wandering animals — lambs, baby goats, deer, peacocks, ducks and various types of chickens, such as Japanese

silkies and Polish hens. When they finally arrived at the barn, they'd see the animals that they'd only read about in books: a male African lion, a Galapagos tortoise, a black bear and a Himalayan bear, reindeer, and a white wolf.

The Fairlee, Vt., attraction was the creation of one man, Bill Green. "All the birds and animals at the farm are for your enjoyment and education," he wrote in his

opening letter in the brochure to his Rare Bird and Animal Farm. The woodsman brought hundreds of animals to his home on Route 5 and, with the help of his family and a dedicated staff, entertained and delighted kids of all ages for almost two decades.

FROM THE WOODS TO THE WILDS

Bill Green (1914-1965) was born in Trenton, N.J. "Dad was born into a very prominent and influential family," says his daughter, Elisabeth Green Dane. "He was raised to follow in his father's footsteps in the banking industry, but that wasn't to be." Bill's mother would bring Bill and his brother, John, to the Orford, N.H., area in the summer to enjoy the country. Bill spent as much time as he could in the woods looking for wildlife. "His mother began to realize that he was not a city boy. In hopes of 'getting it out of his system' she made arrangements for him to become a taxidermist's apprentice."

He apprenticed at the Museum of Natural History in New York City, but passed up college to go on a jaguar and lion hunting expedition to Mato Grosso, Brazil, with Sasha Siemel. "Sasha was considered by many to be the greatest hunter that ever lived," says Dane. "There was no going back to the city for dad."

Bill Green was at home in the woods, and he became an expert hunter and houndsman. He hunted mountain lions for various fish & game departments as well as ranchers in the West. He served as a guide for sportsmen who wanted to hunt bear, bobcat and lynx in New Hampshire, Vermont and Maine. He even started his own strain of bluetick



Bill Green working with Queenie the elephant in 1957.



hounds, which were well known in the hunting world.

As a young adult, he bought his first home in Orford, then later moved to Orfordville. Every winter he would go out West to hunt, and every spring he would return home with a new "pet": a baby deer or a mountain lion. "This collection of self-captured animals wasn't enough for dad. He bought animals from other zoos and animal importers, such as different types of monkeys, Russian wild boar,

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 fancy birds, anacondas, boa constrictors, pythons and my first pet snake — a beautiful, emerald-green, tree boa,” says Dane.

His most significant purchase was in 1953 — a baby elephant named Queenie. She was born in Siam in 1952, and shipped to Trefflich’s Pet Store in New York City in 1953. Bill removed the backseat of the car, filled it with hay, and brought Queenie home to Orfordville.

OPEN FOR BUSINESS

But the homestead was running out of room for a 250-pound pet. The Greens purchased the Brackett Farm in Fairlee. “We hired a couple, the Rays, to come to the farm, as we called it, and put on shows with their trained animals. Mrs. Lalea Ray said, ‘You’ve got all these animals sitting around in pens. You should train some of them,’” recalls Dane. It was the beginning of the Rare Bird and Animal Farm. A 1954 ad in the *Daily Eagle* touted the attraction’s hours: daily, 10 a.m. to dark, July 31 to Aug. 1. An admission postcard, archived at the Fairlee Historical Society, shows that admission for children was 35 cents and 75 cents for adults.

Green was an expert marksman, but he had a way with animals. Collamer Abbott, a Vermont photographer who took publicity photos for Bill Green in 1957, says, “He knew how each animal



Elisabeth and a cheetah, named Caesar, pose on the front steps of Chapman’s Store in Fairlee, Vt.

would respond. He was a natural.”

Although the farm had several animal acts — including a liberty drill with six untethered llamas — Queenie was definitely the main attraction. Dane, at age 12, began working with the 3-year-old elephant in 1956. “We grew up together,” says Dane. The pair made their debut in March 1956 at the Barre (Vt.) Sportsman Show. “We did tricks. Queenie would lie

down, sit up, and pick me up in her trunk.”

The Barre Times reviewed their performance: “The little lady, prettily attired in a ballet costume, was just a bit nervous as her debut began, but like a real trouser she quickly swung into the act and deftly and surely put the young pachyderm through its paces.”

In the summer, when the Rare Bird and Animal Farm reopened for the season, Dane and Queenie performed together daily. Later, Queenie appeared on television shows, marched in parades, and learned to water ski.

AN EXPERIENCE OF A LIFETIME

The Green family spent winters in Florida and Chet French, the head animal keeper, would care for the animals. Dane remembers living on the road, performing at the big hotels along the beaches of Miami. “My most memorable

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 experience was a Christmas Eve show at the Hollywood Hotel in Florida,” says Dane. “It was set up like a three-ring circus, and Queenie and I performed center ring. It was pretty exciting. I swam in the ocean on Christmas Day, then it was time to pack up the truck and travel to the next performance. It was a tough life, but I was so glad to have the experience.”

Bill Green died in 1965, and a fire in November of that year destroyed the building that housed the snack bar, the animal kitchen and 130 birds. His wife, Betty, kept the farm going with Chet French, but later sold Queenie in 1967 and the farm in 1968.

But the farm had made its impression. “I remember walking to the Rare Bird and Animal Farm for a treat on the weekend. It seemed like a very long walk and I always arrived thirsty so the first



Bill Green’s son, Ed, brings a moose to the front door for a publicity photo.

stop was to get a cold soda,” says Palma Chapman Jorgensen, co-owner of Chapman’s Store in Fairlee, Vt. “We always tried to arrive in time to see Queenie the elephant perform. As a young person looking up at such a large animal and seeing Elisabeth sitting on Queenie’s trunk created a desire to travel and join the circus. The shining outfits that Elisabeth wore, the big smile as Queenie picked her up, and the small crowds cheering. Then we would walk around to see the other animals. My next favorite was the peacock with its plume spread out, prancing around the yard. I loved to save my money for the gift shop to get some small item to take home after a full day. The walk home was always longer, tired legs and bellies full of lots of treats.”



Elisabeth and Queenie

“Dad introduced animals to local people that they never would have been able to see,” says Dane, now a Concord, N.H., resident. He also wanted them to learn about the world — in each animal’s pen, Green painted a background depicting the animal’s native habitat. “...the Rare Bird and Animal Farm is not only an invitation to fun but also to learning,” he wrote in the brochure. “Were a youngster to know the name and location of the native lands of all 250 birds and animals at his farm his knowledge of the world’s geography would be considerable. Were he to learn only a few of the animals’ ways and habits he would have taken a giant step into the wonderful world of nature.” UVL

NH’s Animal Farm

New Hampshire residents might remember Benson’s Animal Farm in Hudson. It was founded by John Benson in 1924 as an animal training center, and opened to the public in 1926 with animal exhibits, a miniature train, games, exhibits and later a Wild Animal Circus. By 1934 the parking lot could accommodate 5,200 cars. Benson died in 1943, and the animal farm went through two owners, a financial

downturn and one name change. It closed in November 1987.

Although the two attractions were open during the same time frame, they were very different. Dane remembers visiting Benson’s on several occasions. “We had a similar variety of animals, but not the quantity. Where we had one camel, they had several. Where we had one American bison, they had several,” she says.