

**GORDON HENLEY**

**Interview 184a**

**Part 1: October 22, 2009, at Ellen Trout Zoo, Lufkin, Texas**

**Part 2: January 20, 2010, at The History Center, Diboll, Texas**

**Jonathan Gerland, Interviewer**

**Patsy Colbert, Transcriber**

**ABSTRACT:** In this interview with Jonathan Gerland, Ellen Trout Zoo Director Gordon Henley reminisces about his 33 years at the zoo in Lufkin, talks about the several stages of expansion, and explains several of the projects the zoo has undertaken. He talks about working with the Rotary and Kiwanis Clubs, Friends of the Zoo, Lufkin City Council, and numerous volunteers. Mr. Henley details the zoo's expansion projects, including new animal habitats, the replica Mayan ruin jaguar space, the entranceways, and the most recent expansion and building project. He also mentions the Louisiana pine snake conservation project and the process for zoo accreditation.

**Jonathan Gerland (hereafter JG):** My name is Jonathan Gerland. I'm at the Ellen Trout Zoo with the Director Gordon Henley. It is Thursday October 22, 2009 and we are going to do an oral history interview today. Mr. Henley, we were just visiting briefly a while ago and I believe you've been here 33 years as the director.

**Gordon Henley (hereafter GH):** Yes, we moved here, actually moved in July of 1976 and took over the position on August 1, 1976.

**JG:** What brought you here? Why did you come here?

**GH:** Well, because it was an opportunity for career advancement and I had been visiting with my boss at the time, the director of the Tulsa Zoo, and the person that was an animal food provider to zoos and we were at a training school in Wheeling, West Virginia and they mentioned the Ellen Trout Zoo and the salesman said that was one of the best zoos he had been to and that it was very impressive for a town like Lufkin. I didn't know anything about it and the job became available and I thought, well we will just drive down and see or I applied for it. Then we were selected for an interview and I drove down to see what it was like.

**JG:** You mentioned you were at a zoo in Tulsa. Where did you grow up?

**GH:** In and around Tulsa and in Oklahoma City areas. I have worked at both the Tulsa and Oklahoma City zoos.

**JG:** How did you get involved in working with zoos?

**GH:** It's what I always wanted to do. I attribute that to a trip my father and I took to the Memphis Zoo when I was living in northwestern or northeastern, I mean, Arkansas, it's just basically across from the river from Memphis. We were at the elephant exhibit and

while we were looking at the elephants one of them took a snout full of water and gave us a shower and so I thought, I jokingly told myself...

**JG:** You were baptized.

**GH:** ...that was what I had to do. That was something for me since I can remember and those times when I was about three. All the rest of my going to school days and things like that have been... revolved around animals and wanting to work at a zoo.

**JG:** So not necessarily any family connection to zoos other than just this childhood encounter?

**GH:** My family, my parents owned a shoe store and [the] retail industry and business was their livelihood. I could have gone that route but I preferred to be around animals and my parents encouraged me. They were the kind that did not believe that because I did not want to run a shoe store that I was a bad kid. They encouraged everything that I wanted to do. So, we went to college and...

**JG:** What was your degree in?

**GH:** It's in biology.

**JG:** And where did you go to college?

**GH:** Well I went for three years to the University of Oklahoma and then I got drafted and was in the Army for a year, actually a little over a year. I came back and went to work at the Oklahoma City Zoo when I got out of the Army, commuting to Norman. The university was on the south side of Norman and the zoo was on the north side of Oklahoma City and trying to go to two classes or three classes a day and work, I was driving an enormous amount of distance and time. There was a school just north of the zoo in a town called Edmond, Central State University, so I just finished there. It was real close to the zoo and I could get up there in a few minutes. And that is where I completed the degree. Sometimes I say I was educated at the University of Oklahoma and graduated from Central State. I wouldn't want to insult Central State University either; it is a very good school. From there to the Tulsa Zoo – I started as a zookeeper there and then was promoted to associate curator of herpetology and given the bird collection as well, and shortly thereafter I met Charlotte. She was a docent and volunteer educator for the Tulsa Zoo. We got married and less than a year after that this position became available and we moved to Texas.

**JG:** So we are up to '76 again. Who did you interview with?

**GH:** Harvey Westerholm was the city manager at that time. We came up, we drove up on a Sunday to get to Lufkin and I called and, called his house and told him that we were in town and where we were staying, which was the Ramada Inn. The Ramada Inn is where, basically where the parking lot to Home Depot is now. I guess there were two big

motels in Lufkin at the time, Holiday Inn and the Ramada Inn. The Holiday Inn was down on the corner of the big intersection where the overpass is going and the Chevron station and there was an old motel behind there next to the other motel that is still there [Transcriber's Note: the intersection of Business Highway 59/South First Street and Highway 59 N/Loop 287] They were both there; that is the long way of saying they are both gone. He called us back and said, "Well, I'm just going to come and get you now." I thought well he probably has somebody else in mind then 'cause he's going to stop his Sunday afternoon and come and take us for a courtesy visit and then bring us back to the motel and then tell me that somebody else got the job. But he didn't, he called me up two or three days later while I was back in Tulsa, made the job offer and it was just really exciting.

**JG:** So the interview wasn't a sit down as we are today in someone's office. He picked you up at the hotel and y'all went to the zoo?

**GH:** We came out to the zoo, we drove around, we ate lunch at a cafeteria that is in Chestnut Village. The building is still there but it's not a cafeteria anymore. I guess it would be...

**JG:** Did Charlotte's experience help? Was it a two for one thing?

**GH:** Well not exactly. Her experience...he interviewed both of us and we ended up at his office at city hall and talked for a little while. I presume that the experience for both of us he was impressed with. He did not hire her right away. She came in and started working as an educator and began to develop the education programs that we have – the predecessors of the ones that we have today and actually some of it is still as pertinent today as it was then. He saw what she was doing and what inroads she was making at the schools and the community, because zoo did not have an education program at that time, or a formal one. They would make school presentations here and there but there was nobody designated just to do that. So she demonstrated her value to the zoo and to the city by implementing this program on a voluntary basis and then he came up and said that he was going to try to get her incorporated into the employment records. Tim Jones, who was here before I, and his wife both worked at the zoo.

**JG:** Was that common at the time?

**GH:** Yes it was. There was a husband and wife team at the Kansas City Zoo, husband and wife at the Baton Rouge Zoo, husband and wife at the Alexandria Zoo, and so it was not an uncommon thing in the zoo profession. She has a degree in zoology from Oklahoma State University. The second year she was here he put her on quarter time and then the third year we were here was half time, and then the fourth year, there about, he put her on full time. That is when she became a full time employee. That is why when we have our city award banquets and they give out service pins, her service pin and my service pin aren't at the same time. People say, "Well, you both came here together?" Yes, but she wasn't...

**JG:** She wasn't full time until third year.

**GH:** Yes, she made that program and convinced the city manager of its value and that is how that got started.

**JG:** Okay. Describe the zoo as you saw it in those early days. What did you find here?

**GH:** Well it was much more than I really had expected. Now size wise it probably fell into what I would have expected. But, the exhibits and the quality of the facility when we actually saw it, was a lot better than what I thought, because I would have to say probably like a lot of other people that think a small town zoo is a dog run with a coyote and a monkey.

**JG:** A white tail deer maybe here and there...

**GH:** Yes, and when we got here we first parked in the parking lot of what was going to be our house and went through the small animal building from the back side of it and we went and toured the exhibit work areas and into the public area and I could see the variety of animals in that building was very interesting. A lot of... there were genet, which are small...they're kind of related to skunks only they're African and they look more like cats.

**JG:** How do you spell that?

**GH:** G-e-n-e-t. And there were three species of those. We had meerkats. There were hornbills, bobcats, a lot of really cool animals just in the building.

**JG:** And of course a hippopotamus.

**GH:** Yes, and then we walked out and one of the things that I guess over the years I have been known to do, or been influenced by, we walked right out of the building and in a planter right in front of us were palm trees. I had no idea that palm trees grew here. I thought they only grew in Florida and that was exciting. We got out and we walked around and we looked at the animals out there. The openness of the exhibits...everything was not in cages – except there were a couple of things. When I go back and look at this I don't want to say it in a critical manner, because of... you're a product of the times. But when we went through there were two lions in an enclosure that was 20 by 20 and two tigers in an enclosure that was 20 by 20 and they had one space behind them that was 8 by 8 that they would go out in when the animal care personnel would go in and clean them and feed them. And we thought well, you know you look around at the rest of the zoo and see that it's open, that most of the animals have habitats or they have moats, they have natural environments to live in. So, there has to be challenges and opportunities in the zoo to work with and so we saw that as one. When we actually got the job here that was one of the things that we did. It took about 10 or 11 years to be able to get those cats moved, but we did.

**JG:** How many employees did you have that first year?

**GH:** There were six.

**JG:** Six. Full time?

**GH:** Six full time employees. The zoo itself, well it is kind of hard to explain orally, but where we are sitting now was out in the park. The zoo ended...

**JG:** And we are at the new office.

**GH:** We are at the new office building that we just moved into earlier this year. The zoo actually ended, as we look out to our north, the locomotive and some other... the black buck exhibit out there is where the zoo actually ended coming south. Then when you go back to the north, the zoo ended where my house is and the eastern boundary was the backside of our current Australian exhibit where the wallabies and emus are housed. So, it wasn't real large, but again I was taken by the greenery, the plants, the things that enhance the visit besides the animals and I saw opportunities – like I said it didn't have an education program. So we were looking at things, the functions of the zoo are largely considered to be science and education, conservation and recreation. And we could look and see that recreation was not an issue here. The zoo was jam packed with people when we came in for that interview and it still is. We have about 130,000 people a year that come through.

**JG:** Now those are current numbers. Do you recall a rough ballpark idea of what visitation was in '76?

**GH:** We thought we did. In those years between '76 and 1993 they had a turnstile counter that you would go through. And we watched it to try and ascertain accuracy. There was also a side gate for wheelchairs and strollers that did not have a counter on it. So we would look and see, on days if the line was backed up behind the turnstile people would open the side gate and go through. And then children would also spin the turnstile to watch the numbers turn. So, in those days the turnstile indicator was close to 160,000 a year. When we actually began to charge admission in 1993 we saw no major decline in attendance by just empirically walking out and looking at the crowds, but there was a numerical decline. In fact, I guess the first year we charged admission we only had nine months of that year to count and it was 86,000. Then, it's increased each year. So we feel like those early numbers were gross overestimations of how many people were coming to the zoo.

**JG:** I was reading in some of these newspaper clippings just before I came over, and if I remember right, a voter league gave some approval to the idea or the concept of a city zoo in October, September or October of '65. The Rotary Club was going to sponsor or build the zoo and then the city would take over the operational expenses. And at that time, according to the newspaper, they projected operational costs at \$7500. Of course that was in 1965. Do you remember about what the budget would have been in '76?

**GH:** Yes, in fact that was all part of the selling point and the idea of staffing the zoo with somebody that works half a day, a couple of days a week that could come out and kind of look over things and throw some food to the animals and there would be no major expenses. You know, \$7500 a year, really in '65 I was, I think, a high school student and what \$7500 meant I had no idea. So I can't relate to that value today but when we moved here the budget was about \$50,000. I remember one day, when we were looking at opening the waterfowl pool and the bald eagle exhibit, we had the city council out and the mayor, at that time, Pitsier Garrison was talking to the group in my house, we were sitting in the dining room, and he said something to the city manager that...and at that point the budget had crept up to about \$85,000 and he said something to the city manager about, "Harvey when they started this zoo they said it was going to cost us \$7500 a year to run." And he said, "I bet it's \$75,000 now." And Mr. Westerholm tapped me with his foot, like "don't say anything." (laughter) And today it is right around a million four hundred thousand.

**JG:** A million four hundred thousand. Where does that money come from?

**GH:** Operational expenses come from the general fund, which is largely composed of sales tax and property tax. All improvements that we do, we try to make that a community effort and zoo supporter effort - people that are interested specifically in helping the zoo or seeing the zoo grow and develop. We haven't sought any kind of tax support for any of the growth and development that we have.

**JG:** We may be jumping a little out of the chronology here, but since we are on that subject, talk a little about the Friends of the Ellen Trout Zoo. Was that something that you brought?

**GH:** That was something we worked on. I didn't bring it but it started in 1984. There were some things that the zoo had needs of that we could not get in the budget through the city processes. People that were volunteers out here, we had a docent group that in the early days was provided by what was then called the Service League and is now the Junior League, some of them were aware that other zoos had support groups and three or four of those docents that we had and Charlotte and myself sat down and talked about forming a support group and then I got some copies of by-laws and things from other organizations like that. We sat down and ironed those out and had a CPA come through and do the paper work to get a 501(C)3 status. And that is how that got started. It went from very small projects. The first thing was a lion drinking fountain that is still in use today.

**JG:** Where the water fountain is inside the opened lion's mouth.

**GH:** Yes, that was about a \$750 project. They branched out to doing sidewalks and actually the board did the sidewalks. They came out here after everybody got off work and we formed them up and called the cement company to come out and poured it. We skretted it and broomed it and made the sidewalks. They contributed money to the

python exhibit that is in with our Asia group of exhibits. We have had a lot of help with a lot of equipment for the zoo and some animal purchases. Then, through the Friends of the Zoo, we were able to raise about \$150,000 that built at that time the new lion and tiger exhibit. When we did that we took the opportunity to bring in jaguars. We had the lions and tigers that were in the smaller enclosures. You take a look at lion as the solid color cat from Africa, tiger is the striped cat from Asia and jaguar is the spotted cat from Americas. So that gave us the chance to have 3 color patterns, the basic 3 color patterns of cats and have one from Africa, one from Asia, and one from the Americas – the three largest species of cat in the world. We did that. We also at that time did the first authentic Mayan replica in any zoo, and that was the jaguar exhibit. That is the replica of a temple in Chichén Itzá called The Platform of the Tigers and Eagles. And the tiger in Mexico is the jaguar. A friend of mine and I flew down one Friday afternoon. We flew from Houston to Merida, rented a car and drove over to Chichén Itzá...got the tape measures and the cameras and measured every aspect of that platform and photographed it. We used primitive tricks like take a tape measure and run it across one of the carvings and photograph it. So, when we got back here we would take, and this is in the days of slide projectors, and we would take the slide and project it onto a piece of plywood and use the very same tape measure on there until it got to the size. Then we traced it out and we used that as patterns to make the carvings. Charlotte and I did all the carvings.

**JG:** Sometimes the older technology is more efficient.

**GH:** Well it's one that I knew how to deal with and could implement and we did all the carvings. Then the next major thing they did, that was in the '80's, we opened that exhibit up in about 1988, and then in '93, that is when we did the new entranceways. While they did not have as big a role in the entrance, they had a sizeable chunk of money that went out there to help build the new entrance and gift shop and concession stand. We did have some tax money with that, about \$40,000. We sold Emus, that was in the height of the emus craze and we sold emus to reputable animal dealers who would provide them to other zoos, to get money for that building. We had grants from the Temple Foundation, and I believe the E.L. Kurth Jr. Charitable Foundation, the Simon and Louis Henderson Foundation, the Friends of the Zoo and everybody came together to build that new entrance. That is when we began to charge admission. Admission, all admission at that time went into our zoo building fund, which gave us user fee money then to keep progressing.

**JG:** Explain a little bit, you mentioned the admission, how did that come about? Was it something a long time in coming? Was it a tough decision to make to start charging? I'm assuming it hadn't been charged before.

**GH:** Right, it had been free from 1967 to 1993. And there was...it was a difficult choice because it had been free and we didn't want to make the zoo inaccessible to anybody. If you have a zoo you have to have people come to it and if it's too expensive or too unrealistic then they won't do it. But there were also certain things that were becoming obvious and that is that in the initial days the zoo was not made with high quality materials because there was a general belief that it would not fly. It would not be very

popular and that once it had been given a shot and then didn't work, then they could come in and tear everything down and they wouldn't be out anything. The idea was to have mostly local animals that could be then released. The hippo changed that and it had never been unpopular. It had always grown. Well, we had a lot of things that needed attention and that required some funding. This was a mechanism to help fund repairs, to help fund improvements and at the same time was not an additional burden on tax payers because it's voluntary. We have people that come to the zoo that don't pay tax and so by having user fees then it gets the people who use the zoo, not the people who don't. So we are able to make some improvements that way and we did a few things along the lines, just prior to the '93 opening when we tried to group animals into a geographic area. Asia was the first place and we tried looking at ways of combining exhibits, making them similar, making you be able to see through one into the other. To put species together that appear together that cannot be put together so you get a more complete picture of how the animals are in their environment. That I believe was the point at which people got interested in master planning. So, shortly after the '93 opening of the zoo, and we also coincided the opening and admission fee with the dinosaur exhibit, so we had dinosaurs all over the zoo. Every time you turned around the corner there would be one of them moving and squawking and we had docents around to explain what each of these dinosaurs were.

**JG:** Now describe that in a little more in detail when you say a dinosaur was there.

**GH:** It was what was called "Dinosaurs Alive" and they were animatronic dinosaurs that were in some cases life size and in some cases they were two-thirds life size. We had a life size Allosaur and a one-third life size brontosaur. They sat right out in what we call events area here. They were coming together around a big tree and that ultimate battle of predator-prey and back in the Mesozoic Era. That brought lots of people. In fact, we charged \$5.00 a person then to get in.

**JG:** And what year was that?

**GH:** In 1993, and they stayed through July 4, 1993. Then when they left, we dropped the admission fee from \$5.00 to \$2.00. That was a win-win thing for everybody. The dinosaur exhibit [owners] thought it was a bad idea to get...tag on when you first start charging an admission. But we had people lined up from the entryway all the way down to Martin Luther King and back around Zoo Circle on both ways at eight o'clock or nine o'clock April 1, 1993 to get in to see those dinosaurs. It made a significant amount of money and that was one that gave Friends of the Zoo a nice bankroll or amount of money to begin real fundraising endeavors with. Shortly thereafter, we got into developing a master plan and that was done through the assistance of the Temple Foundation. Once that master plan was developed it was adopted by the city council unanimously in 1996, February of 1996. That began to give us some real targets and goals and opportunities and additional land on which to grow.

**JG:** How many acres is the zoo comprised of now?

**GH:** I believe just based on some loose geometry that it is about 20 acres.

**JG:** Does that include the lake?

**GH:** No that just includes what we have inside the fence.

**JG:** Okay.

**GH:** The Park today is about 148 acres. That would be the lake and the land on the west side too.

**JG:** Now as Zoo Director, you are responsible for what? Besides physical, just what is in the zoo itself?

**GH:** Right.

**JG:** Is the rest of the property the parks department and the city's? So the lake and all that...

**GH:** Yes, we work together with them on that. They maintain the two pavilions we have on the lakefront – pavilion one and pavilion two, but because everybody associates everything that goes on this park with the zoo, we through mutual agreement, felt it was more beneficial to the citizens and our visitors if we booked the pavilions. They can call us, we can book it, and we're here. So if people want to reserve the pavilions they call us and we set them up and reserve those pavilions for them, but they are maintained by the parks department.

**JG:** In that connection, talk a little bit, I know it falls outside of your administration, but the Z&OO Railroad, because as you said, I know most children would definitely equate the Z&OO Railroad...an experience to the Ellen Trout Zoo would not be complete without a ride on the train.

**GH:** That is right. And that is owned and operated by the Lions Club. Normally, they operate in the summer every day and in the winter on weekends. Then when we begin to have our school groups come out then they will again operate the hours that our school kids are here, which is usually 9 to 1 or something like that.

**JG:** Has that been Lions Club from the beginning?

**GH:** Yes, that is all their project. This is one I can be in error with, but I believe that started pretty close to '76, maybe 1975 or something of that nature, but was just before I moved here.

**JG:** I don't know how important this is, if it is let me know, accreditation for the zoo, what exactly is that?

**GH:** That is a process of peer review that denotes a degree of professionalism in your operation. And we have done that. We are in the process now. Our inspectors are due the 17<sup>th</sup> of November unless they change that on me. But, we are looking for them the 17<sup>th</sup> through the 20<sup>th</sup> of November. It is a process whereby we fill out an application; we answer questions that they have over every aspect of the zoo's operation. It is not that they come down here and look at our animals and our exhibits and go home.

**JG:** What is the name of the organization?

**GH:** The Association of Zoos and Aquariums, now. When we started with this process it was the American Association of Zoological Parks and Aquariums, AAZPA, now shortened to AZA. They come through and in this questionnaire there is a section on personnel and it deals with the background and training of all your people. How many you have, what jobs they do, what you provide for them in the way of the opportunities to go to any of the AZA programs. There is a section on finance, which has to do with like your admission fees, how much are they, where do they go, what is your budget like, how has your budget been over a five year period? What is going to happen in the event of an emergency, do you have adequate fund reserves? A hurricane blows through and shuts the zoo down for a while, can you get through that? Or in the worse case scenario, a pandemic where everything is shut down until that gets out of the way, can you endure financially? They will look at physical facilities. They will walk around and look at all the buildings, the walkways, they will look at guardrails, and they will look at fencing, anything like that. They look at water and sewer and drains. They look at the grounds, they look at the landscaping, they look at how the visitors might perceive the zoo as they walk through. They will look at exhibits, they will see if they feel like they are adequate size for the animals that are housed in there. They will look and see if they think they are modern in their portrayal of the animals and its habitat. They look and see if you maintain animals in their normal social groups that they would be found at in the wild. They look at your education programming. They look at the content of that. They look at what the participation is. They look at whether conservation is a message of your education program. They look at your conservation efforts. What are you doing to help conserve animals in the wild and wild habitats? What kind of programs do you have? They look at research programs. How are you contributing to the advancement of biological knowledge with the animals that you have. They look and try and determine that these are appropriate for the institution so that it is not...they are not comparing one zoo to another. They look and say here's what your resources are, here's what programs you're doing and here is how you're providing for your visitors and for the animals and is it appropriate for your situation or could you do better? We fill out about, normally, a book that would be three inches thick with the questionnaire and the supporting documents. This year we did it electronic so they got a CD. They will bring that in here and they verify what we said and see if that is accurate or not. We began accreditation programming in 1983 when it was a voluntary thing. There were members of the AAZPA and then there were accredited members of the AAZPA. I thought that it would be...for a zoo like our zoo, at the time it was still small, that being accredited would give credibility to us engaging in transactions with other zoos like the Bronx Zoo, the San Diego Zoo, somebody who probably would not have heard of us, and they say, "Well the Ellen Trout

Zoo in Lufkin, are they any good or are they not?" Well they are accredited so that means they have been peer reviewed and have passed muster. So we did it in '83. We were the fifth zoo in Texas to be accredited. The ones ahead of us were Fort Worth, San Antonio, Brownsville Gladys Porter Zoo, and the El Paso Zoo. Every other zoo that I did not mention came after us. Some of them were even tabled prior to gaining accreditation. So I think our crew and the support that we get from the city and the people that work here are really committed.

**JG:** You made it on the first application?

**GH:** Then we reapplied in '88 and got it, and it's every five years. Then in '93, '98, what would have been 2003 in that cycle because the number of zoos now had grown. There were about 40 accredited zoos in the country in '83 when we became accredited. Today there are 217 of them and inspecting all these zoos takes time. It takes people and it takes time. So they were looking and said, "Let's split the cycle and we'll put southern zoos inspecting in the winter and inspections for northern zoos will be in the summer and when they did that that put our inspection off until winter of 2003. Therefore accreditation was not going to take place until the spring of 2004, so we got a six month bump. During our inspection, and that took place in December 2003. The...most of the items of concern were minimal. There were one or two places that they wanted a GFI receptacle. They found spider webs in one place, some out dated eyewash and the most severe thing they recommended was that we have a necropsy laboratory separate from our clinic. And we were able to do that.

**JG:** Now for most of our listeners, explain what that is.

**GH:** That is a place for what in people would be an autopsy and in animals it's a necropsy. You look at an animal's remains to determine the cause of death or find out if there are anything, any diseases that could be transmitted to other animals in the collection.

**JG:** And that is standard procedure anytime an animal dies?

**GH:** We do a gross necropsy on most of them that die and some of them we do, if there is justification, we'll do a more thorough one and sometimes even send the remains to another lab to do it.

**JG:** Maybe this isn't the best time to ask it, I can't remember what happened to the bald eagle. Did it die?

**GH:** The one that we had did, it died of old age.

**JG:** Tell a little bit about that because we've got, I think we were flipping through here and we found that photograph of when President Jimmy Carter, Carter wasn't president at the time, I don't think. What year was it?

**GH:** Yes he was president; it was his mother.

**JG:** He was president. His mother came and anyway she helped break ground for that exhibit.

**GH:** She broke ground for that exhibit. At that time the Hushpuppy Olympics was held in the park and like I said, it was much different then than it is now because the Hushpuppy Olympics were held somewhere near where the Karen Pluss Feldman Memorial Pavilion is and the new African bathrooms and the actual place of the gazebo and things where it was held at is gone. But she came over for that and then we were going to do a bald eagle exhibit and so when the word was out that they were looking for something for her to be able to do while she was in Lufkin, I said, "We have a bald eagle exhibit, what better than having the President's mother turn ground." And they jumped on it and she was out for that.

**JG:** Charlie Wilson got involved.

**GH:** Yes, Charlie Wilson, Mayor Garrison were all there.

**JG:** Good photo op.

**GH:** That started that and that eagle was actually one that was in our old entrance area. It had been in the zoo when I started and it had come from a private, not a private, a park I believe in Crockett. And the Fish & Wildlife Service, as I understand it, requested that they move it out of that park and bring it over here to the zoo.

**JG:** Where did the eagle come from?

**GH:** From a park in Crockett.

**JG:** Oh, okay. I'm sorry. I was looking at this clipping while you were speaking and not paying attention. It was in May of 1979. I'm looking at the newspaper clipping.

**GH:** Right, and if it has the complete article there it should say she was here for the Hushpuppy Olympics.

**JG:** Yes, I think it does. You're right.

**GH:** Today the Hushpuppy Olympics is part of the Forest Festival. Then it was held in the spring of the year.

**JG:** Now was there ever another eagle or was it just the one?

**GH:** No there were other ones. All the ones that we can get are deemed non-releasable and there are various things that happen. We've had some that have been gunshot and

they've had to have wings amputated. All of them, with the exception of that particular bird have come from Alaska or the north some place.

**JG:** Have you had more than one at a time?

**GH:** We had two one time.

**JG:** I was thinking you had two one time, male and female?

**GH:** Male and female, they never produced any eggs. Like I said, once they have a white head and tail you can only guesstimate the age. It takes about five years from the time they hatch to get that white tail and head so you know if you got one today that has a white head and tail you can assume he is five years old anyway. But, he can be twenty-five; he could be fifty-five. It's difficult to tell like that.

**JG:** Are they still an endangered species?

**GH:** They are not endangered but they are protected under what is called the Bald Eagle Protection Act. So, they are still managed by the government. We lost an eagle here in, probably I'm thinking, in November of 2008 and December 31, 2008 a game warden brought us an eagle from the Angelina National Forest that had been beat up pretty bad. Our veterinarian, Dr. Michael Nance was working on the bird and we notified the wildlife service, our regional office in Albuquerque and said, "We have got this injured bird and if it's non-releasable we would like to keep it." They replied back, "No, it's going to go to an eagle rehabber, or rehabilitator in San Antonio who has an excellent track record with the eagles." So, we got it stabilized, we got it back on the road to recovery. Then that guy has a private plane and he flew out to the Angelina County Airport. He came up and picked the bird up and I believe it's flying now. Once we got it in good shape then their vet was able to work with it too. I wanted to compliment Dr. Nance on his abilities with that bird because it was next to death when it was brought in.

**JG:** So under whose protection, is it U.S. Fish & Wildlife?

**GH:** Yes, U.S. Fish & Wildlife and they are also protected in Texas under Migratory Bird Treaty Acts and Texas law.

**JG:** This may not be a good question or not but, on zoo animals, like U.S. Fish and Wildlife has protection for eagles as we just said, but say like the hippopotamus is non-native, is there a protective society for that besides animal rights groups, but is there a federal?

**GH:** Not for hippos because they are common in the wild.

**JG:** I just used that as an example.

**GH:** Right, in fact it's perfectly logical to ask because we have various kinds of animals here. We have like the ruffed lemurs, they're endangered in the wild and you can't sell them and buy them and things like that. So, what zoos have done and this goes back to accreditation too, is that you work with species survival plans and distribute animals without monetary benefit, so you don't sell them. Then at other times animals are not listed endangered and you do buy and sell so it just depends really on their legal status. Then if you want to buy and sell endangered species you have to have what's called the captive bred wildlife permit, which is also issued by the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service. The ones you buy have to be documentably captive bred in the United States.

**JG:** I guess some world organizations would come into play here. Animals protected that I guess the United States or any other country would honor treaties and things. I just don't know how that works.

**GH:** Yes, when we shipped Marmosets to Canada, when we imported a jaguar from Canada, we sent a jaguar to Belize and we sent some spectacle owls to Belize, then you get into the international scene. There are laws in these other, even though Marmosets are not found in Canada and jaguars are not found in Canada. They have their legal requirements for the endangered wildlife and the same sorts of things in going to these other countries. So there is an international thing called the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species, C-I-T-E-S, CITES. So, in order to move animals about, even with no money, it requires a CITES permit. Both countries issue permits and then like in our case we would get an import permit from Canada, and an export permit from the United States and then that United States export permit would be the CITES permit to export it into Canada and they would end up having the import permits and we would do the same thing. The actual transaction when you take a look, that we can physically put two spectacle owls in a crate and drive to the airport and be in Belize City from here two hours to the airport, an hour and a half wait at the airport and then two hours to Belize City. So, in six hours or so you can have the birds there. In order to do that, you have to initiate permits and the process there can take six to eight months in order to have that six-hour shipment. It is challenging and there are health requirements in shipping the owls to Belize. They wanted veterinary proof that they had not been exposed to the bird flu, the H1N5 virus. In the United States you can't test them. The USDA won't allow veterinarians to test and yet they want to test. So there seems to be in some cases a lack of knowing what each of these interior agriculture departments do or want. When we got the birds down there they were not tested and we were grilled by their agriculture department about why they can get birds in Panama that are tested and we can't get them in the United States that are. And you can't answer the question because it's a political thing or what our veterinary programs deem appropriate for testing animals. So, there are challenges and issues but ultimately the birds were under veterinary scrutiny at the Belize Zoo before they got put out into the exhibit and were deemed free of the quote "bird flu."

**JG:** Now this next question is extremely open ended but maybe to get you talking about things I might not think of specifically. You've been here 33 years, not necessarily in any order but, what would you...what are sources of pride in being the director here at the zoo? It could be exhibits or just the job itself.

**GH:** Well that's it. I mean, I can go back and say that working in Lufkin has always been good because Lufkin is a good place. I had no intention of staying here 5 years, much less 33. But working with the people here, the support that I got from the city administration and the city council and the public support, media support, the TV station, and KTRE and Lufkin Daily News have been excellent. The radio stations have been very good in helping us out, cooperation from civic clubs – that has been good. Then, we've been able to look at how the zoo is going to grow and how it's going to develop and there will be always something new down the road and there are people who get excited about it. As I said, I don't know why Harvey Westerholm hired somebody in his twenties to come down here and run a zoo, but he did, and I will always be grateful to him for that. He was always a good mentor and a good administrator in my view and I learned a lot from him and I've learned as we've gone along even today, Paul Parker City Manager is a great administrator and a great supporter of the zoo and makes working for the city wonderful. The city council that we have today is great, the Friends of the Zoo organization, everything makes life good at it. It's good for me; I like it. If you go back and say all right we look and our first goal was to be here five years and learn how to deal with city councils and people that I didn't, when I was just managing an animal department. We learned the budget; we learned various things like that. We wanted to move the lions. Well there were, again there were some lessons to be learned and some confidence that had to be developed and that doesn't happen immediately. It was in the '80's, probably '87 when we got the money or began to get the money and funding to develop the cat exhibit. By then I had already been here almost eleven years.

Then the next thing was like the zoo entrance and what we were going to do there and it was done in Mayan Revival style. And I remember we put inside that entrance, we put the architect's conceptual drawings of the buildings and Charlotte and I were walking down the sidewalk behind two ladies as they went through the exit turnstile and this was hanging in a glass faced board and they looked up at that and said, "That will never happen." And within six months of that statement we were working on it. I'm sure they did not know I was right behind them or who I was if they knew someone was behind them. We have had a hand in everything. In the Asian area of the zoo we made the rocks. Four or five of us were working on the clouded leopard exhibit and we were putting cement up there by hand and then smoothing it out and then you scratch it and you put some more up and you get a nice thick coating and then we would put tin foil on it and take a trowel and start cutting it and make rock-looking features and we were taking a break and two gentlemen came by with their grandkids and stood there and looked at that and said, "You know, that just looks like plain old rock" and walked off. Well, everybody was going "yes" because that was what we wanted to do and we were doing it in the primitive method. So we saw the beginning of that themed area of Asia and we continued to build in there and we had a lot of help at that time from the Kiwanis Club and they would come out a couple of times a week and work on these projects. They would pay for all the materials, they would come out with their labor and then we would build the things. That went all over the southwest corner of the zoo. Looking at the fact that I still believe that kind of exhibitry done by a bunch of dedicated people because we had my staff doing it, we had the volunteers doing it, led to the idea that we could do more.

Which came up with a master plan and in that master plan we had the giraffe and rhino and hippo and great apes in this building and new park bathrooms and new bathrooms in the zoo – lots of things and we begin to actually look at that master plan. We went by public appeal or public opinion as to what the first thing was going to be and that was the giraffes and rhinos. And that is what we did and we went after that. And then we went to the Temple Foundation and we went to the Kurth Foundation and we went to everybody that could help us and we gathered support from them and we made that happen. The Friends of the Zoo has been there in these things so really, you know, it's all. And look today, at what we have done with this building and the other building and realize okay this is the most recent project we've completed. There is more to do.

We are looking at trying to bring gorillas to Lufkin. That is the next thing, western lowland gorillas. I've already been visiting with people who have gorillas. There is a zoo in Texas that has three male gorillas they want to send to us today. We just don't have the place. They are young males.

**JG:** That is what I was going to ask is what would it take to get gorillas here?

**GH:** That is what we are going to be looking at once we get through this accreditation cycle. We are doing a lot of things to be ready for the inspectors when they get here. Once we do some basic ground work we will find out what our architect believes the cost will be. Then once we know that we will begin a strategy of fundraising to get the money necessary to do it. There is no end in sight, there is just the next thing and the next thing and the next thing.

**JG:** Now you just completed a pretty big capital project here. Describe that briefly if you wouldn't mind.

**GH:** Well this was the education center and admin complex. Dollar wise, this is the most expensive one to date. Each one has been incrementally higher. The cat building was \$150,000, the cat exhibits were \$150,000. The entrance was about \$250,000, which was the entryway, bathrooms, gift shop and concession stand. Then in terms of what the public sees and appreciates is the giraffe and rhino exhibit. That was about five acres of land for just over a half million dollars. Then we took in another two or three acres of land for the hippos building and public area and that was just over \$700,000. Then this building that we are in now was a \$1,700,000. Along with that we relocated the street for about \$200,000. We built new park bathrooms for \$150,000. We built new bathrooms in the zoo for another \$150,000. We built a accessible parking lot next to pavilion one over here for about \$35,000. We spent \$90,000 assisting the Lions Club in relocating the Z&OO Railroad from the middle of our land to the outside of the land and that project was actually \$120,000 so we put in three quarters of the amount to get that done. We've done infrastructure – water and sewer and things like that that you don't see. So, if you look at the original master plan document, we can check off a whole lot of things that were on that program for 1996. One of the things you mentioned and I don't want to not... be sure I emphasize this and that is the Rotary Club. They are the ones; Walter Trout was a Rotarian. Walter Trout was the person who envisioned the zoo for Lufkin

and the person who went out and gathered the support and got these various committees together and then the Rotary Club, through its zoo committee worked. A lot of that information I got from Joe Byrd who was a Vice President for Walter Trout at Lufkin Industries. The Rotary Club has always had involvement in the zoo. They have built exhibits out here, they have contributed money and I've worked with them, the Rotarians and I've been in the Rotary Club since 1977. They have always had an instrumental part in the zoo as well. So, that is...talk about I've worked with the Rotary Club, worked with the Kiwanis Club, Friends of the Zoo and other volunteers, it's just another kind of example that Lufkin is a place that makes things happen.

**JG:** Okay, well I see we've gone a little over an hour and I do have a few more questions and of course it's understood that we can't cover everything in a short period of time. We just finished up maybe a more suitable place to wrap it up but I did want to go back a little bit and just ask you a little bit more about the animals. Any particular favorites, I know you've been asked this a million times, but of course "Hippy" the hippopotamus, you mentioned Mr. Trout, so you don't have to include that one if you don't want too but I know he was a special one.

**GH:** Yes he was and we would come out at night and in modern zoo terms it's kind of called enrichment. But, he lived in a small pool at the time and we would feed him treats after work and then we would call him into the building and we would go outside and then he would run out of the building and dive in the pool.

**JG:** He was a baby, really, when Mr. Trout got him for Christmas in '65.

**GH:** He was a baby when he came here. He was about 500 pounds when he arrived here in '65. Then he left for two years; he was here December of '65 then he went to Monroe Louisiana for two years to the Louisiana Purchase Gardens and Zoo there and came back when that building was built.

**JG:** His home was being prepared.

**GH:** That would have been in June, early June late May or early June 1967. Then he lived in that spot for just two or three weeks shy of 30 years. So he was about thirty-two and a half years old when he died. But, we have animals here...and that was another one of the impressive things as I mentioned earlier, is that there were groups of neat animals from all over the world. There were probably 120 to 130 animals here at that time. There were nice reptiles, there were lots of birds; the mammals were nice. The numbers of mammal individuals wasn't very high but they took up a lot of room and space. There was a nice collection, as I mentioned, I liked the genets, I liked the meerkats. One of my favorite birds is the crowned crane and after I actually started, I was walking around the grounds and found an exhibit and there were a pair of those in there. So, I was thrilled at that and we ultimately bred those birds. We had probably close to 20 babies from that pair of birds.

**JG:** How often do you do an inventory check?

**GH:** Well now it's constant. It's all computerized, every bit of information that we get on animals goes into...we have a hard copy folder for them and then they're all on the computer and all the information is in the computers. It's a constant upgrading and updating of our animal records.

**JG:** How many animals do you have now?

**GH:** We have eight hundred fifty to nine hundred animals now. We have a big collection of reptiles – reptiles that is one of my favorites. That was what I wanted to do for a long time, was be a curator of reptiles. We have a very super collection of reptiles and we have the largest diverse collection of crocodilians in the state of Texas, that I'm aware of.

**JG:** I think you mentioned before about the Louisiana pine rattler [snake].

**GH:** Right we had the only...the Louisiana pine snake, in fact I was out in the National Forest in Louisiana a week ago today looking at release sites for Louisiana pine snakes that will be produced through the zoo breeding program this coming spring.

**JG:** Describe it a little bit – the work that you've done in that regard.

**GH:** What we are doing, the Louisiana pine snake first you understand is like a bull snake and it's the only one like it in this part of the country. It's found right now in two locations in Texas – in the Angelina National forest and three locations in Louisiana and I believe two of those are in...one's in a national forest, one is in Fort Polk and one is on private land. It's the rarest snake in North America and because it's right here in our area, we want to participate with its conservation. It's called a conservation candidate and that means it has all the legal requirements necessary to list it as endangered. It's protected in Texas. It's not protected in Louisiana. We have...we were the first zoo to breed the Louisiana pine snake back in the eighties. At that time it was not protected and there was not a lot of interest in it. At that time, we go back in the eighties, because it was North American, there was not a lot of zoo interest. The babies, we couldn't dispose of them, so we ended up literally keeping the adults and the babies until they all passed away of old age. Then the zoo in Memphis, the reptile curator there developed an interest in it and they got a bunch of them from North Central Louisiana and began to breed them and distribute them to zoos and they are now part of what is called the species survival plan. We wanted to be back in that program and we received animals that were from the Louisiana stock and we bred those and now we have three of those offspring and we have swapped females with a zoo in Alexandria, Louisiana so that we are changing our genetic makeup of our population and they are too and breeding them for the SSP program. Well two years ago, through a meeting that involves Louisiana pine snakes and red cockaded woodpeckers – the two species of animals live in the same general habitat, loose sandy soils and long leaf pines on hills or ridges. The red cockaded woodpecker has got a much wider distribution than the Louisiana pine snake, but because habitat management for one benefits the other, the groups that work with these animals meet together. So, two years ago in Natchitoches, Louisiana we found out that there were Texas snakes that were at

SFA [Stephen F. Austin State University] that were going to be put into this SSP program. We met with the SSP Coordinator and we met with the people from SFA. They are actually housed at SFA and part of the forest service. We all got together at a restaurant after the meeting was over and determined that those snakes don't have to be shipped out anywhere. They can be brought to Lufkin. We have a special place that is set up just for them. They are not tended to by people who take care of other reptiles so we don't have any issues of disease transmission. They are not housed with them. They have their own equipment so we are now in an endeavor to have a breeding program for Texas specimens. The reality of the importance of that is symbolic in Texas. We are the zoo in Texas, so to speak, with Louisiana pine snakes and we wanted Texas specimens. So we have them. The value of that to the population as a whole is yet to be determined because it's possible that there is not enough genetic difference in Texas and Louisiana to not want to release captive bred specimens wherever their suitable habitat. There is a PhD at SFA now looking at the genetics of these various populations to at least get some data on what the genetics look like. It is something we are proud to be a part of and hopeful that we can at least delay the demise of the species. We don't know why it's going...it's having trouble in these areas where it lives. It feeds on pocket gophers primarily, so to understand the dynamics of the decline you have to understand a lot of things. The soil type is critical, the vegetation type, the understory, the presence or absence of pocket gophers, the activities of people, the presence of roads – all of these factors come into play in trying to save that animal. And as I said earlier, conservation is one of the things that zoos do. With our resources, it doesn't take much money to maintain a population of Louisiana pine snakes and it doesn't take much space. And the animals are right here, twenty-five miles southeast of Lufkin. So, it's just an ideal situation for us to try and be involved in that has potential of real results.

**JG:** All right, well that's pretty much what I had. Is there any final thought you would like to add? You gave a good summary a while ago.

**GH:** Well yes, we kind of jumped around a little bit and did various things. Probably if you are going to do a history you just need to mention that the zoo has had about three growth elements. It was said to be about seven acres. That is what the AAZPA directory said when I moved here, that it was seven acres. Then the next element of growth went out to the east of what the existing zoo was with an area of land about equivalent to what we had. So, if it was seven acres to begin with it went to about fourteen acres the next time. In that area is where the eagle exhibit is, it's where the Rotary bird gallery is – we have some native Texas species. Bobcats, the lions, tigers and jaguars, those are all in that segment. The next one is the master plan staging and that moved out into the rest of the zoo. There is a difference in the exhibitry in the Africa area and in the other part of the zoo in that it's an endeavor to be immersive, to take you into the habitat of the animal or to take you into the country, in this case Africa, where the animals live. So the sidewalks are not sidewalks – they are more like rocky pathways that go through the jungle. The barriers or bushes are heavily planted so that you can't see from one place to the other – you have to follow the trails around. There's absolute minimum of barriers to see animals. You view over a river to see the rhinos and the giraffes and in that river are Nile crocodiles at a place where a bridge has collapsed, underwater viewing of the

hippos. And so it is an attempt on our part to take our visitors out of Lufkin into another place and hopefully they all enjoy their experience. We haven't had any complaints and those things kind of confirm that you are going in the right direction.

**JG:** Definitely.

**GH:** One of the things I would say here that we do, we pay attention to what our constituents say. If they like what we do, we keep doing it. If we catch the drift that there might be something that they don't like, then we back up and say, "Well, let's rethink this" and go off in another direction. But right now they have been happy with what we are doing. That helps continue the growth and progress of the zoo.

**JG:** All right Mr. Henley, well thank you again for visiting with me today.

**GH:** Yes, you're welcome.

## **END OF INTERVIEW**

### **Part II: January 20, 2010**

**JG:** Today's date is January 20, 2010. My name is Jonathan Gerland and I'm with Gordon Henley and Emily Hyatt is also here. We are actually continuing an earlier interview with Mr. Henley that we conducted on October 22, 2009 and there were just a few other things I think we wanted to cover. We wanted to talk a little bit more about the work of the Kiwanis Club.

**GH:** That is right Jonathan. I appreciate the opportunity to continue this interview. I enjoy speaking about the history of the zoo and I think that there really would be no history of the zoo that was accurate without mentioning the involvement of the Lufkin Kiwanis Club. In the late eighties a gentleman by the name of Fred Jacobs, who was a member of the Kiwanis Club...

**JG:** He is my neighbor by the way.

**GH:** Is that right? Well good. His son worked at the Denver Zoo and he had an interest in zoos and he wanted to get involved with our zoo. They began to do a Lemur naming contest, was the original involvement that they had. We had a "Name our Baby Lemur" contest and they named them, Hemur, Zemur and Lioness. Then after that they got more involved and started actually building exhibits. They formed a zoo committee, and these people, the Kiwanis, would come out to the zoo on weekends. We would all get together,

we would design an exhibit and then we would build it. The Kiwanis Club paid for materials and they provided labor. Over the years they have done numerous exhibits. Our Black Buck exhibit is a Kiwanis project. The Mandarin Duck exhibit is a Kiwanis project. Our walk through aviary area is a Kiwanis project, a Tapir exhibit. It goes on. They've done a lot of great work for us. In fact, my daughter kind of coined that part of the zoo as Kiwanis Land.

**JG:** And mention in case we didn't cover it earlier your daughter's name.

**GH:** My daughter was...Jennifer Henley was her name at the time. It is Jennifer Stover today. That was exciting times; it was fun times. But it enabled us to exhibit animals from a geographic region together. That began our kind of lumping animals from places where they are found. So, you go into that area of the zoo, the southwest corner of the zoo, and it's all Asian animals. As you move through the zoo, then you're going to see animals that if you went to Southeast Asia you would have the opportunity to see in the wild. Although I think your chances of seeing the animals are much better at the zoo than they are in Southeast Asia. Ultimately this led to the formation of our master plan, and then the implementation of our master plan. They did a whole lot of work and there were a whole lot of Kiwanians involved in that and it really made a positive impact on the zoo and other involvement. You know, the zoo was founded in the sixties by the Rotary Club. They came back as a result of some of the Kiwanis projects and they began to build exhibits, and so, there's a lot of bronze plaques at the zoo for the Kiwanis Club and the Rotary Club. Those kinds of things have the impact of community involvement, ownership by the people who built it. They bring their families out and show, "Hey we built this at the zoo." "I put that thing in place over there." Or, "Here is something that we did and it fell apart and we had to redo it." So, there is some history of that exhibit and there is some experience in there and it's really been an important part of our zoo, Ellen Trout Zoo in Lufkin. Lufkin is a special place, lot of community involvement. I don't think the history of the zoo would be complete without expressing their, my appreciation and gratitude for their work and how that had an impact on the zoo.

**JG:** Now that you've had a moment to sort of reflect on our earlier interview, is there anything else you wanted to add?

**GH:** Well it's a pretty...

**JG:** Not that you need too, but as long as we had the recorder going.

**GH:** I think we did a pretty good job.

**JG:** I certainly appreciate you doing this with us. Like I said, we hope that, you know, I guess you and the zoo have been synonymous for much of it. (laughter)

**GH:** We have been inseparable for a long time. We've put a lot of time in there. But again, it's been a pleasurable experience because of Lufkin and the surrounding areas.

Everybody comes together for things they think are beneficial and it's a "can do" area and I'm just happy to be a part of it.

**JG:** Okay, thank you very much.

**GH:** Thank you.