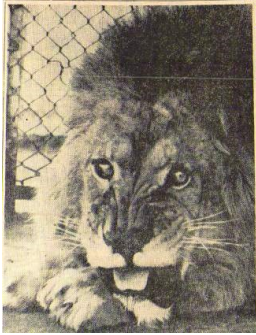


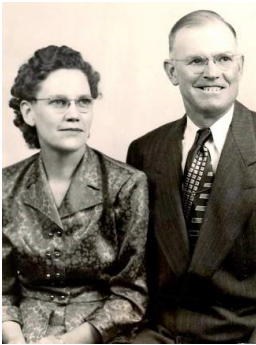
History: Cold Case 1954 — Leo the Lion

By Garry Brewer

This is the only photo of Leo (1936 to 1954), from the Museum of Western Colorado.



Ralph and Vera Stocker.



Leo Lion, a well-known Grand Junction entertainer, was found dead in his home on Friday morning, February 5, 1954, by his attendant Harvey Holloway. Leo apparently succumbed to wounds he had received from a .22 caliber weapon by an unknown sniper on Sunday, Jan. 23. Leo was shot in the face between the nose and mouth and also in the rear part of his body. Since the attack Leo had not been able to eat or drink.

City Park Superintendent Ralph Stocker reported Leo had also been attacked in 1952 by a sniper, but had recovered from those wounds. This time however, the cowardly, depraved killer had accomplished their goal... Kill Leo.

Because of lack of security at night at Lincoln Park or the zoo, there were no clues as to the identity of the killer. Sixty years later the case remains unsolved and whoever shot Leo was never caught.

Leo had come to live in Grand Junction in 1936 when he was traded to the City of Grand Junction in exchange for five monkeys and had resided in the Lincoln Park Zoo until his untimely death. The zoo got its start in the late 1920s when a howling ape by the name of Jo-Jo,

needed a home. Most of Leo's life had been pacing the floor of his cage and awaking the citizens of Grand Junction with his night time roars. He was the favorite animal of zoo goers; many who were children at that time have shared fond memories of Leo as I researched this story. A veterinarian, Dr. Bruce Kronkright, expressed to me how special and unique it was as a child to go to sleep at night in this small community to the roars of a lion.

Ralph Stocker said Leo always obeyed his and his wife, Vera's, commands and Leo the Lion was the prize attraction of the city zoo. As he walked his cage, Leo's natural lithe movements and swagger diminished over the years, but he was content and still brought much enjoyment to those who came by to see him.

Leo's 500-pound remains were taken to the tree section of the city nursery and lowered by a winch into his final resting place.

THE SECOND LEO

Within the week of Leo's death, the Grand Junction Lion's Club was holding their annual carnival and, along with the Mesa County Humane Society, informed the Grand Junction City Council they would purchase a lion and two cubs for the zoo to replace Leo. But the main concern given before the council was that the lion cage would need to be expanded and a night watchman hired for the protection of the entire animal population. At this point the city council thought about closing the zoo, but local newspapers and the public outcry made the council reconsider and the zoo remained open.

The Grand Junction Lions Club bought a female lion and her two small cubs. One of the cubs was named Leo and for many years to come a Leo continued to roar through out the night. The mother lion lived until 1968 and the second Leo until 1969.

By 1969, there were many different animals in the zoo and escaping became an issue. There are many stories of animals that escaped, among them a mountain lions, monkeys, foxes, and bears. One monkey escaped his cage and climbed up a tree, whereupon 15-year-old Nancy Jones tried to catch him and in the process was bitten, receiving a minor wound on her leg. The police were called and tried to catch the monkey. Knowing of the bite the teenager had sustained and fearing the monkey might be rabid, Officer Bob Brown shot the animal. Thankfully for the teenager it was found the monkey was not rabid, but sadly was enraged by teasing from other teenagers.

One monkey named "Happy" was quite the escape artist and kept the park's department people on their toes by trying to find ways to keep him from getting out. The dedicated staff of the parks department did their best to keep the animals contained, but funding to support the zoo and replace the aging cages and pens was not adequate enough to keep the animals and public safe from each other.

So in 1969, when the second Leo died of cancer, a feasibility study was done and the city council closed the zoo. All the animals were placed in other zoos with most of the bears, mountain lions, bobcats and monkeys going to the zoo in Delta, Colo. The last animals to leave were some young coyotes born at the zoo. Their one bad habit was doing what coyotes are known for, howling at

night, and their howls were not as majestic as a lion's roar. They were eventually taken by the Humane Society Shelter for placement.

The community was unhappy about the closing of the zoo; so much so, a letter was written to the editor in 1969, stating if the city council closed the zoo and moved the animals out of Grand Junction, that the city council should leave the cages at Lincoln Park. The letter further communicated that council members and the mayor should go to the zoo on weekends and get in the cages to entertain the public. The general consensus was it was a good idea, but of course it was just wishful thinking.

The family that lived and worked at Lincoln Park all those years and did an outstanding job of maintaining the zoo with a small budget was Ralph (Red) Stocker and his wife Vera Nichols, along with their two daughters Evelyn and Helen. As stated on Helen's birth certificate, she was actually born at Lincoln Park.

Ralph started working for the city in 1926 and retired in 1970. Some of Ralph's greatest achievements were the zoo, the beautification of the downtown shopping area, and Lincoln Park. He was also proud to be a life member of the Grand Junction Garden Club.

Stocker Stadium is named after Ralph Stocker and his family. Two years after retirement, Ralph died on April 22, 1972, and his wife, Vera on May 4, 2001; both are buried in the Orchard Mesa Cemetery.

Anybody who lived in Grand Junction from 1936 to 1969 will tell you about hearing both Leos' voices roaring at night for those 33 years. It's sad that for the past 45 years city residents have not had the experience of hearing the nightly roar of a lion. I guess the lions still sleep tonight.

So for whoever the cowardly individual was who shot Leo the Lion while he was cornered in his cage so many decades ago, they say what goes around, comes around... and I wonder if you experienced "bad karma" for the rest of your life?

Photos: Museum of Western Colorado, Loyd Files Room, Michael Menard: The Daily Sentinel files: Mesa County Library: Snap Photo: City of Grand Junction Stephanie Tuin; Mesa County Assessor's Office, Lavada Palmer: Mesa County Library: Helen Stocker Scholle Family records and photos: Dr. Bruce Kronkright and all the others who told me about listening to the Lion's Roar.

Garry Brewer is storyteller of the tribe; finder of odd knowledge and uninteresting items; a bore to his grandchildren; a pain to his wife on spelling; but a locator of golden nuggets, truths and pearls of wisdom. Email Garry at brewer62@bresnan.net.