

Micke Grove Zoo, always evolving, readies for 60th anniversary

By Lori Gilbert

Record Staff Writer

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LODI — Workers sweated through the sweltering heat and humidity Thursday to install the rubberized surface for a new children's playground inside Micke Grove Zoo.

A ribbon cutting for the play area is Wednesday, the 60th anniversary of the zoo's opening. A gala celebration for the milestone anniversary with music, food trucks, animal keeper talk and more is 11 a.m.-3 p.m. Saturday.

William Micke, the millionaire grape grower who created the zoo in 1957, would hardly recognize his creation today.

Gone are the cement floors and metal bars housing bears, lions, tigers, chimpanzees, baboons, wolves and coyotes. Later, a sea lion and seal pool were added.

In their place are more natural habitats. Out is Monkey Island, along with the monkeys. In is Madagascar: Island Lost in Time, featuring another primate, lemurs.

"We're only a five-acre zoo," said Kevin Hertell, the zoo and interpretive services manager. "We still get questions. People say, 'When are you going to get the giraffes?' ... 'When are you going to get a rhinoceros?'"

The answer is always, "We're a five-acre zoo," although there is a metal sculpture of a giraffe.

"We, as Micke Grove, have done a better job of sizing our animals for the size of our facility," Hertell said.

The largest animal is the snow leopard, which grows to 120 pounds. The smallest is the Madagascar hissing cockroach. Falling in between are geckos and turtles and birds, including the exotic — the yellow-knobbed Curassow, waldrapp ibis and scarlet ibis — and the California

native golden eagle and Swainson's hawk. That doesn't even count the duck that flew into the property of her own accord and hatched eight ducklings, four of which survived and remain on site with her.

The mammals include the different lemurs — ring tailed, red ruffed and black and white ruffed, the golden lion tamarin and cotton top tamarin and the black-handed spider monkey.

Each has its own appeal but may lack the drawing power of some predecessors.

"I was at an event and a woman said, 'I really miss the polar bear,'" Hertell said. "I must have made a little face or something, and she said, 'I know, I know, the enclosure was too small, but I really miss it.' That gives me hope. I didn't have to say it. She brought it up on her own."

Educating the public about zoos, their place in the animal world and what's best for those animals is one of the biggest changes in Micke Grove Zoo since the philanthropic William Micke opened his zoo with a vision of expanding and adding animals on land he had donated to San Joaquin County.

"There's a misconception about zoos," Hertell said, "about the animal treatment, about where we get our animals. Zoos today are not what they used to be. We don't steal animals out of the wild. There's a program through the Association of Zoos and Aquariums and through that organization, there's a Species Survival Program. If you need wildlife, or if one of your wildlife dies, you reach out to your SSP coordinator and they find a facility with an animal looking for a new home."

Additionally, zoos aren't just places where animals are housed and fed.

"You enrich its life, give it something for its psychological and physiological well-being," Hertell said.

Zoos were designed, not so much with animals but with people in mind in the days of William Micke, a seemingly gracious, kind man who donated 59 acres to the county in 1938 for Micke Grove Park with a promise of 152 more surrounding acres. By the time he died in 1961 at the age of 87, his gifts to the county already exceeded a value of \$1 million. He left another \$1.2 million in his will for further park development.

"The people of the community have been good to me and I'm going to be good to them," Micke

said.

When he lost Julia, his beloved wife of 43 years, to a heart attack in 1952, he carried on with the plans the childless couple had made. First, he put \$50,000 into a swimming pool (which no longer exists) at the park in her honor, and began planning his zoo.

It opened on Aug. 9, 1957. On that day, Micke explained his thinking about the critters he'd acquired for it:

"I am interested mainly in getting animals that will be of special fun and interest to the children. Kids don't like to see big, lazy animals that lie around all day and do nothing. They enjoy animals like monkeys, which make them laugh."

He's probably still right about that, and the zoo that bears his name still has entertaining animals, although two of its birds — the golden eagle and turkey vulture — both were injured in the wild and can no longer fly.

Even in the hot weather, however, the lemurs and birds were active. The tortoises were even moving around their enclosure.

Just seeing rare animals is exciting for kids, and adults for that matter, and now younger children will have a playground to enjoy as they visit them.

Although the space wasn't used to house other animals, somehow it's hard not to think that William Micke would approve of his zoo's latest addition.

Contact reporter Lori Gilbert at (209) 546-8284 or lgilbert@recordnet.com. Follow her on Twitter [@lorigrecord](https://twitter.com/lorigrecord).