
I LOVE IT WHEN A PLAN COMES TOGETHER

The following is from an article in Zoo, published by the Topeka Friends of the Zoo. Gary Clarke describes the opening of Gorilla Encounter, one of the most fascinating gorilla exhibits I have experienced. Gary's account of the opening day is important because of the successful planning that made standing in line almost a pleasant experience for visitors. [S. Bitgood, Editor]

THE INSIDE STORY

Gary K. Clarke
Director, Topeka Zoo

The stage was set ... or I should say, the Zoo was set. There was an atmosphere in the air, rather like the calm before the storm. It was just before 9:00 am on Sunday, May 12, 1985 -- the Grand Opening of our new Gorilla Encounter. Dozens of volunteers -- actually hundreds -- had been working for days -- actually months -- in preparation for today.

We anticipated a large crowd -- 14,000 or more. That would equal or surpass our one day attendance record set in May 1983 on the occasion of our Zoo's 50th Anniversary celebration. The weather was perfect. A line had already formed outside our main gate, all the way across the parking lot to the miniature train station. The Topeka community was excited (and so were we), not just at the fact that our long awaited gorilla exhibit was finally opening, but because this event heralded the return of the Zoo's singular star attraction -- Max, our 400 lb gorilla.

The gates opened at 9:00 am and the initial wave of visitors flooded into the Zoo. As they were snaking through the switchback system on their way to Discovering Apes and Gorilla Encounter, I radioed the Lead Keeper to go ahead and let Max out from the holding areas into the new exhibit. I watched the crowd on its way and waited for the Keeper's response. And waited ... and waited. Just as I was about to inquire again, the Keeper responded with four words that are now indelibly imprinted upon my mind.

"Max won't come out."

Well, obviously -- as the saying goes -- a 400 lb gorilla can do anything he wants, so if Max doesn't want to come out now, that's it.

Fortunately, there was another adult male silverback gorilla waiting in the wings -- Oscar, who had been residing in Omaha and was now on loan to us from Jackson, MS.

"Send Oscar out", I replied.

And out he went.

Oscar was out until about 1:30 pm, at which time the signal was given (we ring a bell) for him to come back in. He did so and Max was then introduced into the exhibit.

When you anticipate 14,000 people or more in a zoo that normally considers 3,000-5,000 people a busy day, then you must plan accordingly. We had planned accordingly and as the day progressed we felt very good about how well things seemed to be going. Periodically we would monitor visitors to see how long it took from the moment they entered the front gate until they were able to exit the tunnel at Gorilla Encounter. The maximum time seemed to be about 45 minutes and, during that time frame, they were generally on the move through our switchback system and had a variety of other animals in the Zoo to view while waiting to get into Gorilla Encounter. Other line-waiting activities were provided. For example, fact sheets were handed out on Max's measurements so that the visitor could compare the physical characteristics of a gorilla with his/her own.

By the end of the day, when we closed our gates at precisely 6:00 pm, we had registered 21,995 visitors! Several people said, "Gee, round up another five people real quick so we can make it an even 22,000." While that was certainly a temptation, we felt we should record exactly how many people we had from 9:00 am until 6:00 pm. In reality, we had well over 22,000 people in the Zoo that day if you consider the multitude of volunteers that were present in a variety of capacities.

Many factors fell into place to insure the success of our biggest day ever. The weather was excellent, the publicity and marketing strategies for the event were superb, the planning was precise, and the response of staff and volunteers alike throughout the day was the key to making for a smooth event.

Since that day many people have asked me, "Well, how are you going to top that?" I'm not sure that we want to. Yes, it was great to have such significant numbers; and yes, we were pleased that everything went so well. But, I'm not sure that our goal should be to see how many people we can get through the Zoo in a single day. Rather, our goal should be to provide quality environments for the animals that result in memorable experiences for the Zoo visitor. If you can achieve that and still generate record-setting crowds, so be it. If not, then the numbers are secondary to the prime function of the Zoo.

And that's the inside story.