

It started with a tiger

O. Stanley Smith in 1964 purchased a Bengal tiger cub and named her Happy to promote his Esso gas station and car wash and to fuel interest in the establishment of a Columbia-area zoo. Happy began her “zoo life” in specially built quarters at Constan Car Wash on Gervais Street, where she would remain for the next 10 years.

Simultaneously plans were announced by the Columbia Zoological Society for a fund-raising drive to finance the establishment of a children’s zoo. SCE&G, owner of the land at the confluence of the Broad and Saluda rivers, made 16 choice acres available to the society.

While more than \$65,000 was accumulated from that first fund drive, the project made little progress during the next three years as projected costs rose to \$350,000.

Then in 1967 a Richland-Lexington Joint Planning Committee recommended the development of some 100-plus acres spanning the Saluda River into a larger zoo and park. The management of SCE&G promptly agreed to a 99-year lease at the cost of \$1 per year to help make the dream a reality.

Even with SCE&G’s generosity it became clear to the society and local officials that governmental involvement was essential to the success of the project, and on July 11, 1969 the S.C. Secretary of State officially swore in the Riverbanks Park Commission. John Mehrtens was chosen as the first director, and construction began in 1971.

Mehrtens was a man of vision. He guided the architects and builders to construct exhibits with no bars or visible barriers, offering the animals and the visitors the most natural environments available at the time – much of which is still in use today. Construction was slow due to the new techniques and financial concerns, but the zoo plodded along,

opening April 25, 1974 with Happy finally in residence.

In the years since, Riverbanks Zoo and Garden has developed into one of America’s finest small zoos. The staff, led for the last 30 years by Executive Director Satch Krantz, has earned numerous awards for the breeding of endangered species, such as the Amur Tiger or *Panthera tigris*, in addition to horticulture and marketing.

When Riverbanks Botanical Garden opened in June 1995, an additional 50 acres of land with breathtaking river views, granite outcroppings and the historic pre-Civil War era Saluda Mill became accessible to the public.

Today, Riverbanks Zoo draws more than 850,000 visitors each year to the banks of the Saluda River and has twice been awarded the Governor’s Cup as the top attraction in South Carolina. It all began with a tiger, a dream and a generous, community-minded company.

BY MARY MARLOWE LEVERETTE

To extend the scope of the project to the widest number of viewers, SCE&G and Riverbanks have joined promotional partners WLTX-TV (Channel 19) and *The State* newspaper’s Newspapers in Education program to publicize the site.

The State highlights the online animals each month in its Newspapers In Education section.

WLTX-TV airs feature segments about each animal during its Thursday morning show and highlights the SCE&G ZooView on its Web site.



Photo courtesy of Riverbanks Zoo

and a dream

