

Obituary for ZOO's biggest donor and fan : my father ... an eccentric but sincere conservationist and naturalist

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N. E. Raulston 1920 - 2010

My father gave me a living allowance for 30 years of zoo work. He understood my need not to be under a boss. No boss would have tolerated my crazy ideas, and Zoo Outreach Organisation would not be the unique sprawling chimera that it is. My parents didn't suffer any hardship due to my allowance, although they worried I might die of some arcane Asian disease or, worse, marry an Asian.

My father was born in Hixson, Tennessee, the first of 7 children on a small farm in the country. It was very hard, living at that time and in that place. However, *his* family could afford to buy a "Moon Pie" (5 cents equivalent of 5 paise) for lunch, while his schoolmates lunched on squirrel heads which they sucked. He still had to put newspaper in his shoes to keep out the wet and make them last longer, and I heard about this every time I wanted a new dress or pair of shoes! Coming up hard made him very frugal ... nothing should be wasted, but those were hard times for almost everyone. My mother's father was a Baptist preacher and got paid in vegetables and chickens. She and her 4 sisters had to wear dresses made from flour sacks until they were teenagers, so she was also frugal and saving!

He and his brother Virgil were spirited lads. They put a horse-buggy on the roof of the church one night, which didn't amuse their pastor or father at all. But he turned out to be responsible...putting himself through Business School and got a job with Atlantic Coast Line Railroad where he worked till retirement. That is what brought us to Goldsboro, North Carolina in 1948 where I grew up.

My parents grew up gardening for survival and my father purchased a very large site for a normal sized house so that he had plenty of space for a garden. He would come home from his office job, tear off his white shirt and race for the garden every day like a

convict finally freed. He was the most energetic person I know, aside from my mother, and when he wasn't working at his job or in the garden they both would pursue various hobbies. My Dad was an amateur naturalist. He loved the outdoors and anything connected with the natural world. He fished, hunted a little (he didn't like to kill animals). He collected and studied rocks, any old dried fish or insect specimen, and books about the natural world. He and my mother were interested in rocks and stones and they learned to polish and create semi-precious stones for jewelry which they gave away as birthday gifts to friends and relations.

He read all kinds of books and magazines except fiction and collected a large number of books on many topics. He was interested in astronomy, geology, geography, medicine, anthropology, all of which and more were well represented in his library. He also collected books on the railroad, on the Civil War and World Wars that America was involved in. He was extremely interested in animal welfare. He loved animals and with some neighbors set up a humane society, the first in our city. He used to go out at night with tear gas in his pockets to protect himself when trying to get people to stop cruel practices at horse shows. He sat with animals in the pound on Sundays and holidays (off days for the staff) in case someone came with their kids to get a dog or cat. He donated to several animal welfare and wildlife conservation charities. He fed stray dogs and cats everywhere he stayed ... there were several at the railway yard where he worked and he made pets of all. Sometimes he irritated people with this habit. Once he saw a cat that lived in a hardware store and felt it was not sufficiently fed. So he went almost every day and fed the cat. The owners weren't happy because they kept the cat to kill mice and rats in the store!

We kept cats as pets and when they got killed on the busy street by our house, my Dad and I would sit over them and cry together. We got dogs then and kept them fenced in the backyard cum garden. They were Boston Terriers, notorious for their weak stomachs, and we took one with us on a visit to my Dad's parents. The dog rode up on the back of the seat behind the driver. It was a very hot day and no AC then in cars or anywhere and we were all sweating and miserable. Then the dog vomited right down my father's collar (bull's eye) where his contribution slithered hotly down my Dad's back. My mother and I were beside ourselves with hysterical laughter as my Dad grit his teeth. I think that is the last time we took a dog on those trips.

In addition to this he found time for good works in human welfare. He loved to help people and spent much of his time on this, both as an individual and with the service organizations he joined. He used to take vegetables to individuals and also to institutions that helped people. At one time in addition to his own big garden, he worked two more gardens on other people's land to have enough for all he wanted to give to. He was good to his parents and family, and my mother's, helping out financially all the time. He helped their sisters and brothers when they were in college. He always wanted to help the underdog ... a midget, a lady with her face shot off, anyone with a disability. My mother and I were not such saints and we resented these people !

Many of my father's various interests had a distinct "down side". For example, everything he collected became sacred to him. If he found someone's old photo album in a junk store, he bought it and would not throw it away ... he felt sorry for whomever had died and had to abandon it. Once he found a sort of funeral or "death-collage" ... a collection of things connected with a baby's death mounted on velvet and covered with a glass box, like an aquarium, and hung on the wall. He was so touched by this he wanted to put it on our mantle piece and did until my mother saw it. I have it now. I probably won't be able to throw it away either.

He collected bottles, guns, antique furniture which he refinished himself. LOTS of bottles ... we have them all over the house and stacked up in the yard. Stuffed toys ... I moved 300 out of his bedroom this week and there are more in the garage and in the attic. Not one could be discarded while he lived. He loved to shop and get things cheap. He used go from store to store looking for bargains, spending more money on gasoline (even in those days) than he saved. He made friends at the stores and I think this was his **real** social life. He couldn't pass up a yard sale and was officially diagnosed (by me) as a chronic yard-sale-oholic.

He had an very well-developed sense of humour which bordered on vulgarity. He collected smutty books of jokes and pictures. He loved toilet jokes and embarrassed my mother and I to death many

many times telling these in decent company. He also tormented us with practical jokes ... he loved to put this device under the toilet seat so when the next innocent person sat down it squirted water up their butt. He'd be outside listening for our screams and laughed like a crazy man. He always had a joke for everybody ... he was popular with his doctors who thought his insulting trashy jokes about their profession were hilarious.

By the time he was about 45 he began having severe health problems and conditions. Over his lifetime, he beat 4 cancers 4 times, losing a lung in his most recent bout. He had macular degeneration, which progressed until he had only a tiny sliver of vision left. He had a bad hip which was operated but did not succeed and was in pain and unable to walk without assistance the rest of his life. He nursed my mother very well in her last years despite his own problems. When she passed away he went into a terrible decline, lost his will to live and was hospitalized for some time. Later, at Sunbridge Rehab facility he met a lady also with serious medical problems and they became good friends, helping one another, which restored his will to live.

A year ago he was diagnosed with severe aortic stenosis and could not be operated due to having only one lung so this additional heart problem was like a death sentence. The last 3-4 years he had a G.I. problem which caused him to stop eating for varying periods. He was hospitalized many times for this ... weakness and dehydration. This time, he didn't respond to treatment and passed away there. Too much was against him. He died of congestive heart failure and pneumonia.

While I was in India, worried about my folks incessantly. I asked several times a year if I should come home and help them and they always refused. They said they got more "mileage" out of my work and achievements than they would if I was just a nursemaid and I know that is true to an extent. They didn't say much but I heard reports of their pride in my working for wildlife conservation and animal welfare. They kept a special table in the living room for my various articles, books, awards and photos.

Finally, when my mother couldn't walk and my Dad stayed in bed resting his hip much of the time, I just moved back, commuting between US and India every few months. When my mother passed away my Dad shifted to an assisted living facility which was just 3 minutes from his friend and I could spend half my time in India. He hated that I had to be away from my work. I was in Vietnam attending a conference when my mother passed away and never forgave myself and suffered such guilt. When my Dad died 14 May 2010, I was right there and I had been there for him a great deal for which I am so grateful. He was within two months of 90 years old and he was at peace with his passing.