

EXPO True Stories – Mutual of Omaha's Wild Kingdom at the Ridpath Hotel (transcript of an audio recording)

Hi my name is Eldon. My grandpa told me this story about Expo 74. And about 20 years ago, I decided I should probably make a tape of some of his stories. So here it is. And, I hope you can hear him OK.

My name is Peter and I have been asked by my grandson Eldon to record some of the things I have done in my life. I think this is my third recording. Back in the 1970s I was working in television. Kind of doing independent things until someone with money would make me a little less independent.

The best job I had during this time was working for Mutual of Omaha's Wild Kingdom. Back in the day there were only three, well four if you counted public television, stations. Mutual of Omaha was this insurance company. I think it was actually located in New York, but they were the main sponsors of this TV show and it had to do with a couple of guys who were experts on animals. They both had jobs in big zoos. Jim Fowler and Marlin Perkins. I always thought it was kind of weird that these guys had animal lingo in their names.

But Marlin was the older of the two. On the air, he kinda came off as a Mr. Peabody type guy but really he was pretty, I guess you'd say, macho. As he got older he had the reputation of avoiding the action but I never saw that side of him. I know when there were some of the stunts with more dangerous animals he would often have a martini or two before hand. Liquid courage? I was kind of an assistant on that show. Got to travel all around the world. I learned a lot about filming and about sound, about mixing drinks and animals. It was no secret that, in order to get a shot, sometimes, we would go through two or three critters to make sure what we got was good. Sometimes, I do feel bad about the animals dying so we could show people why we needed to protect them. But it could be a dangerous job. Maybe that's why a life insurance company liked to sponsor it.

We didn't know anything about Spokane, or the World's Fair, Expo 74 at the time. Then Nixon did the opening day speech, and right there and then Spokane and Expo became a great lead-in on the news because they would be able to show Nixon in a positive light and then pivot to the stuff that they were saying he was doing that was criminal. Kind of a Jekyll and Hyde thing. So all of a sudden,

everyone is aware of Expo and with its environmental theme, "Don't be a litterbug" stuff. It was something everybody liked, so Mutual of Omaha wanted in on the expo action. The only thing was that all the booths, the pavilions and other places at the fair were already filled with other countries and other corporations showcasing their stuff. But Mutual of Omaha wanted in and wouldn't take no for an answer. So, I think it was Jim Fowler, it could have been Marlin, had this idea that if we couldn't be in the fair, maybe we could be next to it. So we started looking at places. The Davenport would have been good, but they were making money hand-over-fist with tourists. Eventually, we got the Ridpath Hotel. It was a little farther away but still downtown. They had a little convention center thing across the street, and rent was cheap.

Of course Marlin and Jim were hardly there. They had zoos to run, plus they were famous. I set up the displays in the main room of the convention center. We had a five month lease there. I remember that. Most of the display animals were shot and stuffed, well the taxidermists liked to say they were taken and mounted, which, to me, sounds worse, but what do I know. We had some beavers, a tiger, a lion, an emu, I think there was a deer or an elk stuffed too. The kind of animals which may have been killed during the production of the TV Show. I was surprised that Marlin let us have the hyena. He always kept that one at his house. I wasn't there, but the story he told was that the hyena had gotten into his stash of Oreo cookies when they were on a safari. It was the middle of the night and Marlin came home from an extended cocktail hour to his tent to see the hyena eating his cookies and he shot it right then and there. If you looked close, in the hyena's mouth there was always a cookie. Marlin would pull it out, eat it for show and then there was always another cookie in it. I don't know if there was a dispenser in there or if Perkins would just replace it later. Anyway. That taxidermied beast was there.

We really wanted to have some live animals too, but the Ridpath was worried about the mess, but eventually they let us have a couple of small cages with animals in them - wombats, little lizards, a black mamba, that kinda thing. That was Jim Fowler who talked them into that. I remember that. The little animals could still get pretty wound up so, they gave me a lesson in how to shoot em up with etorphine, I think that's what it was called. It's the stuff they loaded up the tranquilizer darts with every day. They also gave me a box of loose syringes of just about every size made and a jar of needles.

I could just jab them through the cage, and would do that every morning. The only warning was that I should avoid the neck because if the stuff got into a vein instead of the muscle, it would make the animals sick, maybe even die. Of course, the snakes didn't have necks, or they were all neck depending on how you looked at it.

The crowds were pretty good each day. About once a week, I would go down to the train station and pick up a new animal and ship one out, occasionally two. I think we tried to do this Sunday nights when we were shut down. One time I went down there. I had a cage full of voles or moles, I can't remember which. I was shipping them back and picking up a new animal. And it turned out to be a zebra. What the hell was I supposed to do with a zebra? It was kind of mean-spirited too. Tried biting me a bunch. I still don't know if there was some kind of mix up or if this was Marlin's idea of a joke. All I knew was I had a big striped problem on my hands. There weren't cel phones at the time. Just telegraphs and telephones. So I was stuck. No one else was running the show. So, I went to a rental company got some fencing, some hay, a trailer and I brought my jug of tranquilizer juice – the etorphine. I hired some local kids to help load the zebra. Dot was its name. I gathered that because there was "D.O.T." on the crate. Although that could've stood for department of transportation. Anyhow we got that thing tranquilized, loaded it up and I took it to the Ridpath. We put it on some old carpeting and we drug it right into the room. It was kinda weird. It was just laying there on the floor, while all the other stuffed animals, bears, crocodiles, tigers, didn't seem to care much. I don't know ,it just seemed weird. I knew the Ridpath was going to throw a fit. This was just way too big.

The next morning, before we opened, I went down to make sure everything was alright. Probably about five or so in the morning. I didn't sleep all night. I should have just stayed in the convention hall instead of going back upstairs and trying to sleep. Because when I got down there, it was a mess. The Zebra had woke up and had knocked down the fencing and it was going crazy. All I could do was slam the door closed and run back upstairs and get the jug of tranquilizer.

Now, this was the best job I ever had. I was passing myself off as some sort of adventurer, some animal expert. I often wondered how far I could go in this business. I was even seen in some of the tv show clips. Marlin always just referred me to as "an assistant" or something when I had to lasso shut an alligator's mouth or coax a rattlesnake out of a mailbox, or what not. It was good money and I did not want to lose this job.

So, I loaded up the biggest syringe I could find, it was as big as a turkey baster, with the etorphine. To be honest, I was drinking a little of the stuff at night. Just a little to help me sleep, but there was still a couple more gallon jugs of the stuff. A lifetime supply.

I opened the door to the convention center. The zebra was laying there upright with its legs underneath it. Kind of like a child's piggy bank, that's what it reminded me of. I didn't give it a chance to stand up. I ran across the room with

the syringe over my head. Those big eyes looked at me. They went all white for just a second. It bared its teeth. The back legs were starting to push its ass up and the front legs were having a harder time of it. I fell right on top of it and plunged that needle right into its god-danged neck. I pushed the giant plunger on the syringe with both my thumbs. One on top of the other. Hard! The stuff was thick. At the same time as the syringe emptied. It jumped up and sent me into the air, knocking over a couple of gray squirrel cages. They got loose, but just stood there. A plume of blood sprayed from the zebra's neck. And then just as fast as it went up, it went down. Down to the red shag carpet. Dot took three slow gulps of air, each exhalation sounding like a resignation, a surrender. And the zebra died right there on the floor of the Ridpath Convention Center. Blood oozed out of the carotid artery. I had mistakenly shot a bucketful of medication straight into the zebra's bloodstream. And as big as this zebra was when it was alive, laying there, stretched out dead, it looked gigantic. All 900 pounds of it.

Now, I had a problem. It was a big one. A big striped one. It was strange. All the other chatter from the alive animals stopped for a moment, as if they saw the zebra's spirit leave its body. Weird. I needed to sober up. There were some tarps we had used that the taxidermied animals were shipped in. The one that had covered the polar bear was pretty big. I had to cover this thing up right where it lay. And I needed to make a phone call to Marlin or Jim. I knew that whatever happened, I would probably be out of a job but worse than that, I had killed a zebra, a zebra with a name - Dot.

If I called Jim, he would be pretty matter of fact about stuff. I thought he would make me turn myself into the police. Looking back on it, I don't know why I thought that. Marlin was more of a wild card. Somehow, I felt like he must've gone through something like this before. So I picked him. Besides, it was his zoo's zebra.

I found a pay phone and started loading it up with quarters. I could have called collect but I figured that may have left more of a paper trail. I had the direct line into his office. It was 7:30 here which made it 9:30 in St Louis. Marlin was understandably angry with me. After he called me every name in the book, he told me that he shouldn't have sent such a large animal this way to begin with. He also told me that the Zebra (he didn't name it so maybe the D.O.T. was for department of transportation) had recently been diagnosed with a neuroendocrine cancer (pretty common with zebras). This may be why it had died from the tranquilizer, maybe. Marlin said he would be coming out and gave me some specific instructions. 1. Close the display until he got to Spokane. 2. Stop drinking the etorphine. 3. Contact Victor Yung in the kitchen of the Ridpath restaurant - Ankenny's. Ankenny's was a restaurant on the top floor. One of the swankiest places in Spokane. He said he would be calling Victor ASAP.

After I put the closed sign on the doors of the convention center, I took the elevator up to Ankenny's 13 floors, if that wasn't an omen... I asked to see Mr. Victor. They said he wouldn't be in for a couple hours, so I walked around Spokane, up to the Bon Marche, The Crescent and the Davenport Hotel. It was kind of run down but you could tell that it really used to be something. I looped back after some breakfast at a little café. Jerry's?

Mister Yung met me at the pass-through door to the restaurant's kitchen. He looked concerned, but not at all worried. I guess the only Chinese person I felt like I knew was Hop Sing from Bonanza. And this guy kind of reminded me of him. Mister Yung was older than Hop Sing. But he had the braided ponytail, little mustache and beard and wore a chef's get-up. But when he spoke it wasn't like Hop Sing's voice like I expected. He had a deep western drawl, like a cowboy from Texas. Later on, I would learn that Victor Yung had been a major figure in Spokane's Chinatown, when there was a Chinatown and he even had connections with some of the opium dens there in the 1920s.

He wanted me to call him Victor and told me not to worry, that he would take care of it. He would need a little help but not much. Three guys at the bar, white guys, looked at Victor and he nodded his head. I followed them out to the restaurant and back down to the convention center. I went to unlock the door, but Victor must have known about some kind of defect to the lock because he hit it a certain way and the door just popped open.

It was obvious they had done this kind of work before. One of them just carried a roll of paper. The other had something on a dolly and the third guy just looked pissed. Victor carried some knives and a saw. There was a freight elevator I hadn't noticed before. We dragged the zebra on the tarp through its doors and then took it downstairs to the parking garage. There were some doors down there that opened into a room with a drain in the floor. Mister Yung made cuts around the animal and peeled off the hide. Then the rest of Victor's team started sawing and filleting. Victor stood there supervising the operation. I found out the big thing on the dolly was a grinder and they got busy wrapping up zebra hamburger in sheets torn from the roll of white paper. It was obvious they had done this same kind of work before, together. I hoped it was just animals.

And just like that, it was done. Mr. Yung rolled up the zebra skin like a mat. He started looking at his wristwatch as the entrails, tarp and bones were dropped into a dumpster just outside the garage. Victor looked up from his watch, as a city garbage truck picked up the dumpster with its giant forks and shook out its contents into the back. From the savannas of Africa to the landfill in Spokane, that zebra had lived one weird life.

I went back up to the convention hall and everything looked about like it did the day before. Mr. Yung's people had taken care of the mess in there too. The fencing had been returned. The blood was scrubbed up. All the animals were back in their cages including the squirrels. About the only thing that I had to do was to administer the etorphine to the badger and check on the snakes.

That night, Marlin was back in town. He didn't have much to say to me. There was a big private party at the Ridpath for Expo bigwigs and city VIPs. Marlin hosted. I heard the burgers, ribs and steaks were really good. I guess I had provided the meat, but I wasn't invited.

Marlin had left behind one of his jungle outfits for me to wear. Sometimes, kids would ask me for my autograph. I would give it to them and I would pull a cookie out of the hyena for them too. I didn't get any more live animals, and the ones that died on my watch from then on were carefully cataloged, reported and even sometimes shipped back to the zoo of origin. After the fair, I stuck around in Spokane. My TV career was over. But thanks to my time with the animals, stuffed, alive and in between, I was able to parlay that into being hired for starting a little zoo in Spokane after the World's Fair. It didn't amount to much, but it helped pay the bills and helped me start my family.

Oh yeah. One of my last days there, Mister Yung handed me a pouch. It was zebra skinned and I still keep my smokes and lighter in it.

And that's what I remember about Expo74.

How was that? Was that OK?