

There's No Business Like Monkey Business

By Reg P. Wydeven
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As a kid, one of my favorite memories was getting up on Saturday mornings and eating Cheerios with my dad while watching 'Tarzan.' Based on the works of author Edgar Rice Burroughs, the TV show starred American Olympic gold medal swimmer Johnny Weissmuller as Tarzan, the man who was raised by apes in Africa. The show also featured Cheetah, Tarzan's chimpanzee sidekick.

Sadly, on Christmas Eve, Cheetah died at the age of 80 of kidney failure at a Florida animal sanctuary. Cheetah came to the sanctuary from Weissmuller's estate sometime around 1960. Cheetah's long, peaceful retirement is the exception rather than the rule when it comes to animal actors in Hollywood from his era. For example, my dad's favorite movie is 'Every Which Way But Loose,' featuring Clint Eastwood and his smart aleck orangutan, Clyde. Clyde was purportedly trained and controlled with vicious beatings, and was found dead of a cerebral hemorrhage a few weeks after filming wrapped for the movie's sequel, 'Any Which Way You Can.'

In the 1930s, when Tarzan was made, the use of animals in film was not regulated. In Westerns, horses were intentionally toppled in mid-gallop with invisible wires. In the 1939 Henry Fonda film 'Jesse James,' a blindfolded horse was pushed off a high cliff above the Lake of the Ozarks to get a shot of a cowboy on horseback jumping into the water. The horse broke its back and had to be put down.

This led to the Motion Picture Association of America adding a section to its production code that explicitly prohibited cruel and hazardous practices like wire-tripping. Additionally, the American Humane Association opened a Hollywood office to review productions. Today, the AHA monitors over 2,000 film and TV productions per year. If the AHA's on-set consultant attests its guidelines have been followed, a film can run the coveted tagline "No animals were harmed in the making of this motion picture" in its end credits.

On the day before Cheetah died, the movie 'We Bought a Zoo' was released. Starring Matt Damon, the movie is loosely based on the true story of a British writer who purchased and rehabilitated a broken-down zoo. While the film received an "outstanding" safety rating from the AHA for its treatment of lions, tigers and bears (oh my), controversy ensued after Damon's character said, "You don't need any special knowledge to run a zoo. What you need is a lot of heart."

Zoo keepers cringed, as it takes a ton of knowledge and resources to properly run a zoo. This was evident after Terry Thompson, the 62-year-old owner of a private zoo in Zanesville, Ohio, purposely released his animals before committing suicide. Police had to shoot 48 animals, including 18 endangered Bengal tigers. In response, Julia Gallucci, a primatologist with PETA, in protesting the movie's premiere, said "The message that you don't need expertise to run a zoo is totally irresponsible."

As a result of the Zanesville tragedy, Ohio is proposing new legislation that would ban the purchase of other exotic animals, or those other than typical household pets. Starting in 2014, current owners of exotic animals would be prohibited from keeping them unless they applied to be a "private shelter" and met new caging requirements and care standards. Zoos, circuses, sanctuaries and research facilities would be exempt from the ban.

If the measure passes, there will only be seven remaining states, including Wisconsin, that do not require owners of exotic animals to obtain a license or permit to possess them. Because I live in Wisconsin, thankfully I cannot get in trouble for living with a fox.

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