

OBITUARY

Marvin Lee Jones, 8 November 1928 – 4 April 2006

Marvin Jones is gone. He left us suddenly on the afternoon of Tuesday 4 April in his adopted hometown of San Diego, California. After enjoying lunch at his favorite restaurant on the Embarcadero, the reports say he walked to a bench, sat down, and was seized by a massive heart attack. He was 77.

For those who may not have known much about him, Marvin was a walking zoo encyclopedia and a legend in his own time. No one knew more about which zoo had which animal when and for how long – not only in America but worldwide. A native of Philadelphia, he was a lifelong bachelor and always lived by himself.

Through the late Dr William Mann, long-time director of the National Zoo in Washington, D.C., I met Marvin 47 years ago – first by telephone in 1959, then via correspondence and finally in person in 1961. He grew up in a humble family, was rather isolated as a child, and later led a loner lifestyle. Marvin eschewed the trappings of materialism. He never owned an automobile and is one of the few men I have known of his era and age who never drove one. His living quarters were Spartan but housed a treasure trove of books, animal data and zoo ephemera. His apartment in San Diego was likely the nicest place he ever had. If he had an extravagance it was travel – not, mind you, to this or that resort but to visit cities with zoos. These were low-budget affairs, often pursuing backbreaking itineraries.

Faithfulness to friends was Marvin's greatest virtue, and I feel lucky to have been included among them. He was a resource of unparalleled importance. When he was a small boy in the 1930s his father regularly took him to the Philadelphia Zoo. From that grew a love of the genre which led to a keeper's job at that zoo in 1945 when he was only 16 years old. His father had died when he was but 13, and he had to go to work to support himself and his mother with whom he lived. Marvin never was any good at diplomacy – at least not as to zoo matters which, after all, was his world. His 'talking out of school' to folks at the Bronx Zoo about problems at the Philadelphia Zoo got him fired from there. (That was a long-running problem for Marvin and got him on the bad side of not a few zoo directors and animal dealers over the years.) To use a popular idiom of today, Marvin 'told it like it was' and not as a zoo director might have wanted it shaded and spun. Expedient he was not.

After the Philadelphia Zoo he got a better-paying job in the textile industry, running a big embroidery machine in a Philadelphia plant. That gave him some discretionary income by which to do what he relished – traveling around visiting zoos.

Marvin never completed high school (secondary school in Britain, Gymnasium in Germany, etc.) and was largely self-educated, including a proficiency in the German language. His was an example of learning, not for its own sake, but to satisfy his interests in zoos and taxonomy. He was also well versed in local and world politics, history and social affairs. His interests extended to philately, trains, and circuses. In fact the last letter I received from him, in March, was

about animals with Circus Krone. A bona fide Germanophile, Marvin was a voracious reader of German newspapers and magazines and relished his many trips to that country. He loved wearing the Prinz Heinrich caps he brought back. Always, however, zoos formed the axis around which Marvin's world rotated. He saw them as influencing contemporary culture rather than the other way around.



Marvin Jones giving an informal lecture to U.S. Army personnel at Saigon Zoo, Vietnam, in September 1969.

In 1951 Marvin was drafted into the United States Army and became a career enlisted man, retiring as a Sergeant First Class in 1972. The Army gave him what he wanted most – an opportunity to travel and visit zoos. At various times he was stationed in or near Washington, D.C., Louisville, Kentucky, Huntsville, Alabama, and Oakland, California, from which he fanned out to see zoos all over the United States and Canada. Two of his stints were at bases near Washington, totaling some eight years altogether. During this time he became a fixture at the National Zoo. He spent most weekends there and did volunteer work compiling checklists of the zoo's animals. For world travel, he used his overseas Army postings to visit zoos around the globe, including, inter alia, England and Western Europe, Japan, Korea, Australia, and Vietnam. After he retired from military service in 1972 he continued to travel extensively.

Everywhere Marvin went he meticulously recorded not only the animals he saw but also what he could abstract from the records of the various collections. By way of example, during a 1982 trip to Europe he gained access to the archives

of the Jardin des Plantes in Paris. There he found that the later mighty African elephant Jumbo did not arrive there as a calf in 1861, as most of the literature has it, but two years later in 1863.

While in the Army, Marvin usually held administrative jobs. Many times he had nothing to do but sit at a desk with a typewriter. So, he wrote – about zoos, naturally. He was a prodigious correspondent. Take April 1968; in that one month he wrote 74 letters to zoo friends around the world. He did this month after month. These were not just perfunctory messages but detailed epistles of many pages each. All were crammed with current zoo news and records of animals in past collections. Those lucky enough to be on his mailing list did not need *International Zoo News* or the *Newsletter* of the American Association of Zoological Parks and Aquariums (AAZPA – now AZA). Marvin told it all or nearly so. Many of his missives translated German zoo publications for his American correspondents, few of whom could read that language.

While still in the Army, Marvin served as Associate Editor of the *AAZPA Newsletter* in 1962–65 and again in 1970–71. He was that organization's historian, and conceptualized and saw to the publication of the first-ever census of rare animals in American zoos. All this he did on a volunteer basis. Among many zoo and animal related organizations, he was a Scientific Fellow of the Zoological Society of London and a member of the German Mammal Society.

After he retired from the Army in 1972, Marvin went around the country, lecturing at zoos for modest honoraria, always researching zoo records wherever he could gain access. He made numerous zoo trips abroad, often living in zoo personnel quarters on site. Marvin's immense amount of data contributed significantly to the studbooks and species inventory systems which began to emerge in the 1960s and 1970s. In 1974 he became a consultant to the San Diego Zoo, working on animal record keeping. Then in 1981 he became a full-time employee as San Diego Zoo Registrar. He retired in 1993 and continued to hold the title 'Registrar Emeritus' until his death.

Marvin worked tirelessly to help others with their zoo and animal writings. He did this without regard to himself, at much personal sacrifice, and mostly without any financial remuneration. He did it because he loved it. His was a near missionary-like fervor to spread the gospel of the zoos. Probably his last major assist was to Richard Weigl for his recently published book *Longevity of Mammals in Captivity from the Living Collections of the World*. If Marvin had a specialty, longevity was likely it. He published a number of papers on the subject himself, including 'Longevity of captive mammals' (*Der Zoologische Garten*, 1982) and 'Longevity of ungulates in captivity' (*International Zoo Yearbook*, 1993).

To those of us who kept in touch with him, it was obvious that Marvin had been failing in recent months. He had a history of heart problems, so it was not really a shock to learn of his demise. Still, when Elizabeth Frank (Milwaukee Zoo) called me with the sad news, I was shaken.

Many a time when I was writing about this or that animal in captivity and wanted material about longevity – or which zoos first had the animal and when – I would call Marvin and he would have the answer, if not right then, within a few hours. On 4 April 2006 that resource was lost forever. May he rest in peace!

Richard J. Reynolds, III,
Atlanta, Georgia, U.S.A.

Mazuri™ Zoo Foods closer to reality



The source of balanced quality diets and supplements

 **Mazuri™ Zoo Foods**

P.O. Box 705, Witham, Essex, CM8 3AD, England

Mazuri UK: Tel: +44 (0) 1376 511 260 Fax: +44 (0) 1376 511 247

Mazuri France: Tel: +33 (0) 1.30.10.94.94 Fax: +33 (0) 1.30.10.94.99

Mazuri Germany (Aleckwa): Tel: +49 (0) 62.36.51.949 Fax: +49 (0) 62.36.14.94

UK website: www.mazurifoods.com Germany website: www.mazuri.de

For supply to other European or Worldwide countries, please contact the MAZURI UK office
e-mail: info@mazurifoods.com