

# AMERICA'S FIRST ZOO

Philadelphia Zoological Garden

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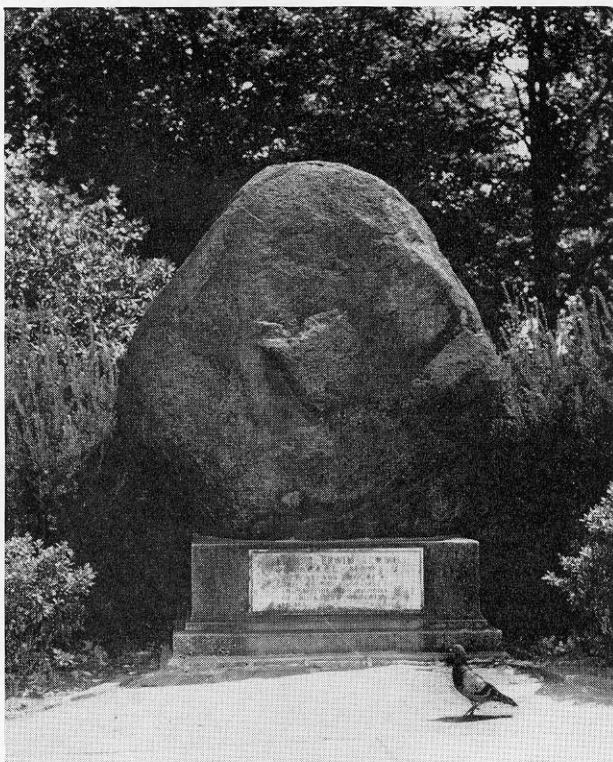
December, 1957

SUCCESSOR TO FAUNA

## *Arthur Erwin Brown*

"Custodian of the Garden" And Naturalist of Note

*by Roger Conant Curator of Reptiles*



IN THE FAR NORTHERN END of the Philadelphia Zoological Garden and within a few steps of the exit turnstile stands a massive quartzite boulder that is a memorial to a remarkable man—Arthur Erwin Brown, executive head of the Garden for thirty-four years and an astute naturalist who achieved considerable renown as a herpetologist. Most Zoo visitors pass the boulder with scarcely a glance, and only the most observing or inquisitive read the inscription below it which states:

ARTHUR ERWIN BROWN  
MDCCCL — MCMX  
SECRETARY AND DIRECTOR OF  
THE ZOOLOGICAL SOCIETY OF  
PHILADELPHIA AND CVSTODIAN  
OF THIS GARDEN MDCCCLXXVI  
— MCMX

And — having read — the average person's next thought almost invariably must be, "Who was Arthur Erwin Brown?" Only the oldest and most devoted Zoo enthusiasts could be expected to remember him, for he died in MCMX (1910, if you are a little rusty on your Roman numerals). Many more persons will recall the late C. Emerson Brown, who served as director of the Garden some years later, but the second Mister Brown was no relation to his predecessor.

What manner of man was Arthur Erwin Brown

and how did he so greatly earn the respect of the Board of Directors of the Zoological Society that they authorized the installation of a memorial soon after his death? Just lately, in the course of some research on American snakes, I have had occasion to delve rather deeply into Brown's scientific writings, and I am more than ever impressed with the scope and profundity of his knowledge. I have been curious about him and have looked into certain of the Zoo's reports and records where his name is mentioned. It is appropriate, perhaps, to set down a few facts about him while they are still fresh in mind.

Arthur Erwin Brown was born in Bucks County, Pennsylvania, on August 14, 1850, and his parents were Samuel Corbin Brown and Achsah Erwin Kennedy. He received a liberal education both in America and Europe, and one may presume, from his later deep interest in zoology, that he had liked and studied animals from earliest boyhood onward. Yet it was at least in part for his executive ability that he was appointed Superintendent of America's First Zoo in April of 1876; he left a post as deputy superintendent of the Delaware and Raritan Canal in accepting his new assignment. One can well imagine with what a jaundiced eye the young man of twenty-six was viewed by older Zoo employees, especially since he was replacing the veteran and popular Captain Thompson who indignantly refused to stay on as Brown's assistant. According to the *Philadelphia Times* for April 3, 1876, "There was an air of dejection visible in the countenance of every attache of the 'Zoo,' and their talk was all of Captain Frank Thompson's resignation and the new superintendent. Every one seemed to feel that the real head and front of the establishment was gone, for Captain Thompson had probably more practical and general knowledge of all branches of animal creation than anybody in the country."

How well young Brown overcame any hostility that may have been directed toward him is amply attested by his long record of accomplishment.

The year 1876, when he received his baptism as a Zoo man, was a notable one in the history of the Philadelphia Zoo, for, with the Centennial Exposition virtually across the street in Fairmount Park,

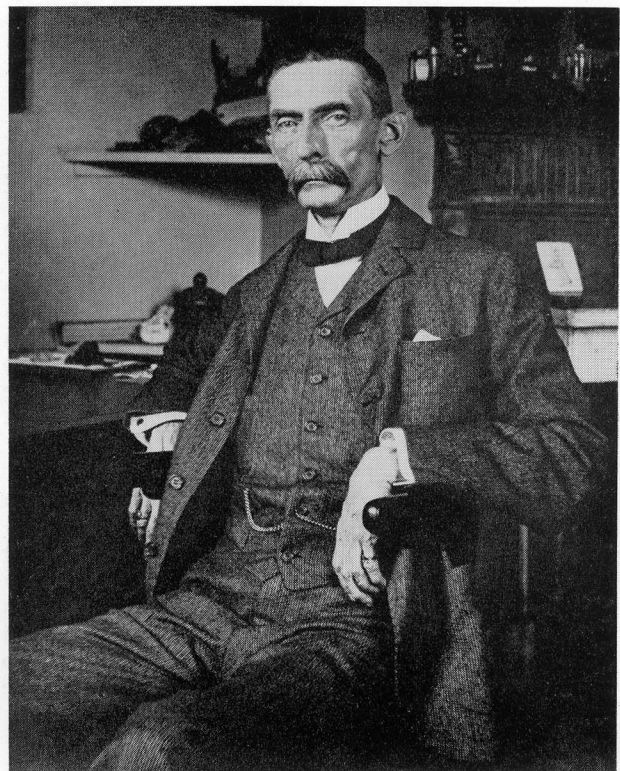
great crowds were attracted. A total of 677,630 visitors passed through the Zoo turnstiles and thereby set an attendance record that was not exceeded until seventy-five years later when the new Carnivora House was opened in 1951. Lean years followed the successes of 1876, however, and the Zoological Garden felt the effects of financial panics, poor business conditions, and other disturbances that had a deleterious effect upon attendance. It was during these difficult periods, and they seem to have recurred with discouraging frequency, that Brown's leadership was distinctly manifest. His devotion to the Garden inspired his keepers and other employees despite salary cuts and other retrenchments; he kept the Zoo well stocked with animals through gifts from friends and even strangers to whom he appealed for help; and he obtained the first financial aid from the City of Philadelphia.

#### ***Elected Secretary of the Society***

In recognition of his value to his institution, Brown was elected Secretary of the Zoological Society in 1897. An appreciation of his work and accomplishments occupies an entire page in the 1911 report of the Society under the heading of "Memorial to Arthur Erwin Brown."

F. Robert Gilpin, an employee of the Zoological Garden for fifty-two years and who is now in charge of the South Entrance Gate, worked with Arthur Erwin Brown for several years. Mr. Gilpin, who has supplied many of the facts for this little essay, describes him as a tall man who, in certain lights and postures, strongly resembled Abraham Lincoln. He was a calm, kindly person who always insisted on hearing both sides of any controversy to the full before rendering a decision. He was a bachelor. During the early portion of his management of the Zoo he resided in the John Penn House (now the Zoo office), but in later years he lived with his sister in center city. He walked to work and home again and only used public transportation during inclement weather.

In the field of science the name of Arthur Erwin Brown is an important and enduring one. His score and more of publications in zoology were chiefly in



herpetology, but he also wrote papers on bears, anthropoids, and monkeys. These were based in large part upon specimens that were exhibited in the Zoological Garden. He was also deeply interested in evolution, a topic that profoundly altered the thinking of most naturalists of his day and the various facets of which were the basis of many and prolonged learned arguments.

Brown described four North American snakes that previously had been unknown to science, and it is remarkable that three of them are not only unusual in features of pattern or anatomy but they are relatively rare in museum collections even to this day. One of them is the Short-tailed Snake, *Stilosoma extenuatum*, a slender spotted serpent not exceeding two feet in length and no larger in diameter than a stout knitting needle; it is a burrower occurring only in north central Florida. The other two rarities are known chiefly from Trans-Pecos Texas, the high, arid, mountain-studded plain between the Pecos River and the Rio Grande. One is the Trans-Pecos Rat Snake, *Elaphe subocularis*, and the other the Davis Mountain Kingsnake, *Lampropeltis alterna*, of which the seventh known specimen was not reported until 1950. His fourth North American serpent, originally described as a full species, is now considered to be a western race, or subspecies, of the Checkered Garter Snake and is known scientifically as *Thamnophis marcianus nigrolateris*. The type specimens of all four snakes were exhibited alive at the Zoo, thus attesting to his energies in obtaining interesting additions for the animal collection. Although he did engage in some field work, he caught none of these himself, but received them instead



from persons with whom he corresponded. He was in touch with collectors in many parts of the world. He also described new snakes from South America and Borneo.

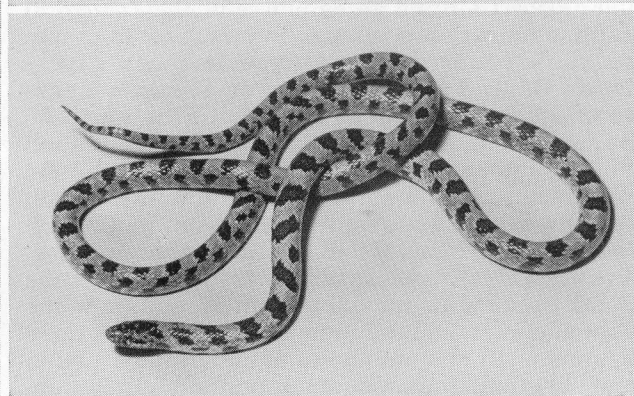
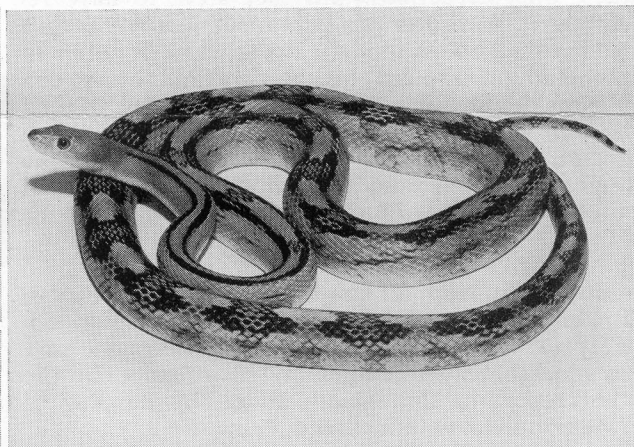
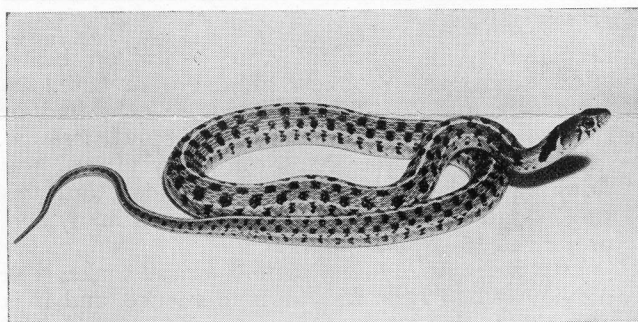
The most widely used of all of Brown's publications was his "Review of the Genera and Species of American Snakes, North of Mexico," which appeared in the Proceedings of the Academy of Natural Sciences of Philadelphia in 1901. Although this is now out of date, it was long the standard check list and reference for all North American herpetologists. He became a noted authority on snakes and his counsel was sought by persons from many walks of life, from the small boy wanting to know the name of the serpent he had caught to the most erudite of colleagues who needed an expert opinion about some disputed point.

Another painstaking work, but one that was never published, is the Species Book, written in his own hand and containing a list of all the kinds of mammals, birds, reptiles, and amphibians that had been exhibited in the Zoological Garden. He prepared a completely new list every ten years, and the fourth book bears the inscription "revised and corrected up to April 17, 1909." It contains nearly 300 pages giving the scientific and common name and the

habitat (now called range) of vertebrate animals. Also included are a list of all the species of animals that had given birth to young in the Zoo and a review of the animal inventories. The last entry, dated February 28, 1910, lists 487 mammals, 875 birds, 354 reptiles, and 61 amphibians, for a total of 1777 specimens, a very respectable figure in view of the fact that we have only approximately the same number of animals on exhibition in the Zoo today.

At the time of his death, Arthur Erwin Brown was Vice-President of the Academy of Natural Sciences, and a member of the Board of Curators, in which body the management of the Academy was vested at the time. He was also a member of the Board of Managers of the Wistar Institute of Anatomy and Biology and an Honorary Member of the New York Zoological Society. Recognition of his many achievements was formalized in 1908 when the University of Pennsylvania conferred upon him the honorary degree of Doctor of Science.

He was active until the very day of his death. He suffered a fatal heart attack on October 29, 1910, while walking along one of the paths of the Zoological Garden near where the great boulder was later erected in his memory.



These are the four North American snakes that were first described by Arthur Erwin Brown. Upper left: Western Checkered Garter Snake. Upper right: Trans-Pecos Rat Snake. Lower left: Davis Mountain Kingsnake. Lower right: Short-tailed Snake. The photograph of the Kingsnake, which was found among some of Mr. Brown's papers at the Zoo, was either taken by him or under his direction, and is of the type specimen of the species. Other photos by Isabelle Hunt Conant.