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Museum or Mausoleum

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Oil Nature Earth Children

The history of the Dallas Arboretum and Botanical Garden is lucidly ironic. It was made possible by a man who accomplished major discoveries and advancements in oil exploration. These findings led to the extreme dependency on petroleum in present day, and have also been revealed to be intensely harmful to the environment. This is where the seemingly unintended irony comes into play, considering that the Arboretum is a place that promotes and practices the nurturing and preservation of nature (as did the man who made the oil related discoveries that are now taking part in destroying the atmosphere). The Dallas Arboretum and Botanical Garden possesses a specific aim in the interest of children and bringing their bond with (and knowledge of) nature to a more intimate level. This is all in hopes that the youth will obtain a heightened appreciation of the inner workings of the environment as well as pro-active desires to protect it. In a sense, the history of Dallas Arboretum can be perceived as a narrative, a story, a cycle of life, seeing that the same source that was unintentionally responsible for destruction is also bound to the creation of a potential solution to the problem.

Originally, in the early 1930s, the land that now exists as the Dallas Arboretum was a dairy farm. The farm was purchased by Everette and Nell DeGolyer in 1939. Mr. DeGolyer studied seismic exploration and his discoveries “…marked him as one of the first pioneers of the oil industry to explore for oil using scientific methods. His work and success advanced the sciences of petroleum geology, geophysics, and reservoir engineering.”[[1]](#footnote-1) He located many bountiful wells in Mexico, and the success of these advanced findings “propelled Mexico into one of the largest oil producing nations at the time when the world’s industry and navies became dependent on foreign crude, foreshadowing World War 1 and today’s reliance on Mideast oil.”[[2]](#footnote-2) Mr. DeGolyer’s extreme accomplishments in oil location and production led him to affiliate many oil exploration companies; the last of these being the DeGolyer and Macnaughton oil consulting company in Dallas in which he was President and CEO.

Aside from his dedicated involvement with oil, Mr. DeGolyer expressed a love for nature and chaired a committee to locate a piece of land in Dallas for an arboretum;but before this could be developed he became very ill. After suffering a prolonged sickness Everette Lee DeGolyer committed suicide. Nell DeGolyer kept the house until she passed away sixteen years after her husband in 1972, and the house was given to Southern Methodist University (SMU).[[3]](#footnote-3)

The university ended up selling the forty-four-acre DeGolyer estate to the City of Dallas in 1977. The Dallas Park board then suggested that it become the official location for the Dallas Arboretum, and they urged the Dallas Arboretum & Botanical Society (DABS) to raise funding for the beginning expenses.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Whilst DABS raised the money to support the arboretum dream, Ralph Rogers (a major supporter of the arboretum) purchased the Roberta and Alex Camp estate. This estate was purchased by DABS in 1980 after they had raised over 1 million dollars to support their botanical visions. By 1982, when it was apparent that the idea of the arboretum would be financially attainable, the city signed a contract stating that “the Dallas Arboretum and Botanical Society, Inc., would manage this land and the activities on it for the City of Dallas with terms that were advantageous to both parties. In turn, the Botanical Society turned over the ownership of the Camp Estate to the city, forming what is now the sixty-six acres of the Dallas Arboretum.” [[5]](#footnote-5)

The Camp home is now used as an office space for Society members, and is often the place where meetings, lectures, workshops, and special events are held; for the most part it is not open to the public.[[6]](#footnote-6) This contrasts drastically with DeGolyer home which is open for continuous daily tours. Information on the DeGolyers is much more readily available and in greater detail than that of the Camp’s. This appears to be influenced by the fact that the DeGolyer’s contributions to oil exploration have played such a major part of history that has only grown stronger with time.

In the time period of Mr. DeGolyer the excessive amounts of toxic waste produced by the attainment of oil weren’t emphasized yet. No one spoke of global warming or the sickly state of the earth partially due to the overbearing dependency on petroleum and the billions of tons of carbon that is released into the atmosphere when it is extracted. Surly due to the fact that he possessed such a love of nature, and expressed a passionate desire to protect it, he wasn’t aware that “drilling, processing, and burning oil is dirty and damaging to the health of people everywhere, not to mention the health of the planet.”[[7]](#footnote-7)

Regardless of Mr. DeGolyer’s awareness (or lack thereof) these alarming facts remain the same, and although they appear to be the worst truths imaginable their actuality is only a grain of sand in the desert of issues that are deteriorating the environment and all of its natural wonders. These abused aspects of nature are not only divine, but essential for human life on earth. The knowledge of importance combined with the growing rate of destruction by human hands presses emphasis on spreading education and awareness while also re-introducing a genuine appreciation for nature.

This is the Arboretum’s goal of manifestation. The visitors are encouraged to open their spirits and minds using the land.[[8]](#footnote-8) While the Dallas Arboretum strives to “create an interactive space for all ages”[[9]](#footnote-9), there seems to be an increasing focus on children. The only issue with these young folks (who will determine the future) is the engaging improvements of electronics which leads to more and more kids that are plugging into the indoors and tuning out the exterior landscape. As author of *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature Deficit Disorder* Richard Louv puts it:

Rapidly advancing technologies are blurring the lines between humans, other animals, and machines. The postmodern notion that reality is only a construct- that we are what we program- suggests limitless possibilities; but as the young spend less and less of their lives in natural surroundings, their senses narrow, physiologically, and psychologically, and this reduces the richness of human experience.[[10]](#footnote-10)

Influencing a higher quality of human experience and developing a stronger connection with nature in the lives of the youth is not going to happen without tangible interactive efforts; and a public attraction is an ideal place to begin. “It is because museums have a formative as well as reflective role in social relations that they are potentially of such influence.”[[11]](#footnote-11)

A potential impact is illustrated by the Dallas Arboretum’s “master plan” which currently consists of a Children’s Garden and Horticulture Center. The vision is one of cost that was taken under by the capital campaign chairman Cecile Bonte who “led the drive that has raised close to $50 million for the project.”[[12]](#footnote-12) This garden is under construction and will be open to the public in 2013; it is being constructed on the only part of the land that was previously undeveloped.[[13]](#footnote-13) The outdoor exhibit will contain 15 classrooms including: Pure Energy, First Adventure, Incredible Edible garden, Living Cycles, and Earth Cycles. In addition there are 4 spacious interactive exhibits made up of: The Discovery Center, The Wild Wetlands Walk, Texas Skywalk & Habitats, and Plants are Alive. All of these are fully intended “…to provide them [the children] with the opportunity to learn about the interconnectedness of nature.”[[14]](#footnote-14)

The positive reaction ignited within children through exposure to such interactive exhibitions has already been observed by the Dallas arboretum’s horticulture manager, Susan Conlon Morgan, during her participation in the Brooklyn Botanic Garden’s Project Green Reach (PGR). The project consisted of trained teacher teams working with urban youth grades K-8 on science and garden projects. The projects resulted in positive life experiences, enhanced abilities in a variety of different areas, as well as implementing a sense of gratitude for the natural atmosphere. “Participants developed science and reasoning skills through participating in plant based education, and they developed skills related to writing, public speaking, geography, art, and cooking…Direct experience in the garden at BBG contributed to participants’ environmental awareness and appreciation.”[[15]](#footnote-15)

The Children’s Garden will mirror the results of the PGR project, and support the statement provided by Sharon Macdonald in *Theorizing Museums* that “any museum or exhibition is, in effect, a statement of position. It is a theory: a suggested way of seeing the world. And, like any other theory, it may offer insight and illumination.”[[16]](#footnote-16) The garden will offer much needed natural experiences for youth, and encourage positive change for the future of human experience and the environment. The history of the Dallas Arboretum illustrates the abilities of the museum to grow from the past, and develop positive changes influenced by present conditions that will impact the future in an important way.

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