

Calgary, 20 March 2019

Dinosaurs, dancing and the birth of a prehistoric park

In the 1920's, fossil fever was gripping Alberta. Prehistoric bones were being unearthed along the banks of the Red Deer River near Drumheller at a furious pace. Curious Calgarians were captivated by the archeological wonders. Among them, members of the Calgary Zoological Society whose meetings often included long discussions on the fascinating finds.

In 1931, zoo director Lars Willumsen visited the Hagenback Park Zoo in Germany and was overwhelmed with their dinosaur display. He returned to Calgary with a bold idea: Construct a prehistoric park at the St. George's Island Zoo in Calgary. The following year, work had begun on the first of the ancient beasts under the guidance of famed Banff sculptor Charles Beil.

Parks worker Arne Koskeleinen and zoo staffer John Kanerva joined the team for that first dinosaur build, a chasmosaurus belli. Kanerva would take over from Beil and design and construct the remaining dinosaurs including the Crown jewel of the collection – the giant brontosaurus that would go on to be the mascot of The Calgary Zoo. Dinny the Dinosaur, as the giant brontosaurus was dubbed, stood a stunning 12-metres high and three times that in length.

In a letter to City Council in 1936, the Calgary Zoological Society updated progress on the \$50,000 project. It boasted that the transformation taking place at the Calgary Zoo would make it into one of the top in the country. The letter was sent in support of an application for a concession stand on St. George's Island.

And, in a scene right out of *Footloose*, the Zoological Society also implored council shut down a "dancehall" on the island. A *Calgary Herald*

story at time reads: "The society also favours the dance hall being permanently closed or razed because of the belief the dances attracted undesirable persons and that the reputation of the park was suffering."



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Over the ensuing decades, the prehistoric park became a major draw at The Calgary Zoo and the 120-tonne Dinny centrepiece became a majestic photo-op for tourists spanning generations.

In 1968, in appreciation for their roles in the park's creation, John Kanerva, Charlie Biel and Aarne Koskeleinen were honoured in a ceremony with Lt. Gov. Grant MacEwan in which he presented them with life memberships to the Calgary Zoological Society.

In 1974, a plaque bearing their names was unveiled in the park.