

## **Benson's Wild Animal Farm**

John T. Benson, born in England in 1879, was an animal trainer and dealer who traveled extensively and became United States manager of German's Hagenbeck Company prior to World War II. Mr. Benson purchased over 200 acres of land in Hudson, New Hampshire in 1922 to house the various animals he obtained, as Hudson is conveniently located approximately one hour north of Boston, Massachusetts. When these animals were brought to the United States, they first needed to be quarantined, then often were trained and shipped to circuses or zoos. Thus, the quiet farming community of Hudson, New Hampshire became the location of "The Strangest Farm on Earth."

Local residents began to stop by the property trying to glimpse some of the exotic creatures-definitely not ordinary farm animals! The Boston and Maine Railroad Station was located behind what is now known as the Watanick Grange Hall, so it was not unusual to see a mini parade of animals from the train station in Hudson Center to nearby Benson's. In 1924, Benson opened the Farm to the public. While he did charge a small entrance fee, Hudson residents were allowed in at no charge. Benson's became a popular place to visit on the weekends. Soon, people were traveling from all over New England to visit Benson's and Mr. Benson began to expand the farm, adding various attractions, rides and concessions each year. Mr. Benson died in 1943. Benson's was sold and continued to be a major tourist attraction until it began its slow decline in the 1960s. In 1979, Arthur Provencher, a Nashua native, became the new owner and worked hard to add new attractions and make the place viable once more. Unfortunately, due to many circumstances, New England's Playworld Amusement Park and Zoo (renamed so in 1987) closed at the end of that same year.

The State of New Hampshire Department of Transportation (NHDOT) purchased the land for approximately \$4 million in 1992 as wetlands mitigation to offset various highway projects' impacts on wetlands. Of the approximately 168 acres of land, about 40 acres of wetlands will be constructed on the property. The Town of Hudson and NHDOT agreed that the Town of Hudson would acquire the property at a very reasonable price, with stringent restrictions, preserving the rest of the land as a passive recreation park.

### **The Benson's Park Committee**

In 2001, The Hudson Board of Selectmen created the Benson's Committee to recommend a site plan with proposed uses for the Benson's property.

The original Benson's Committee: two Selectmen's representatives, three citizens' representatives, one Recreation Department representative, one Historical Society representative. This dynamic group conducted site walks, toured the remaining buildings, hosted a Benson's informational booth at the 2001 Hudson Old Home Days event, held a public workshop, solicited input via questionnaires, and hosted clean up days which attracted many people. The Committee also was instrumental in obtaining the original Memorandum of Agreement from the NHDOT and conveying their research and concerns to the Selectmen.

The Committee worked with representatives from NHDOT, Nashua Regional Planning Commission, The Town and the firm of Vanasse, Hangen, Brustlin, Inc (VHB) and developed the Benson's Property Master Plan, which was presented to the Hudson Board of Selectmen at their meeting of March 26, 2002. The Benson's Property Master Plan was accepted by a unanimous vote of the Selectmen on that same date and sent to the Planning Board for consideration as an amendment to the Town of Hudson 1996 Master Plan.

### **2002 Benson's Master Plan**

The Benson's Master Plan includes an introduction, a site analysis, a proposed development plan, a capital improvement plan and various maps. In the site analysis, existing conditions of the remaining buildings, grounds, vegetation and paths were documented. The property was divided into three zones: Active/historic, Passive/recreation, minimal/native. The active/historic area contains about 35 acres of land. Ideas for this area, which includes the existing office, elephant house, railroad station (same one mentioned previously in this report, which was relocated to the Benson property), ticket booth and Haselton Barn, include: museum, educational center, visitors' center, parking, restrooms, and benches. The passive recreation area lists picnic areas, concert area, gardens, paved trails, canoeing, playgrounds, open play fields, soccer fields. The minimal/native area lists multi-use trails for walking, hiking, horseback riding, biking, cross country skiing, wildlife habitats, outdoor classrooms, bird watching, and nature walks.

The Benson's Master Plan includes detailed project phasing prioritization spreadsheets, focusing on the historic Benson's area as the first priority, as well as preliminary cost estimates for the various projects. Twelve factors went into determining the priority list: restores or upgrades necessary infrastructure, fosters partnership with others, corrects unsafe condition or reduces liability, provides education opportunity, provides greenway or trail linkage, provides access to park features, facilitates access or service for disabled people, provides a feature not currently offered or in short supply, complements other program elements, reduces or does not add to operating or maintenance costs, establishes a visible presence on the property and maintains community interest in the site, complements NHDOT wetland restoration.

\$5.7 million (in 2002) was the cost estimate to complete all of the projects listed in the Benson's Master Plan. It must be stressed, however, that this dollar estimate is the total of all the proposed enhancements and upgrades to the property and this long term project to

be phased over many years. Perhaps some of those long term goals will never be accomplished. For example, NHDOT stated that the Town could rebuild the red barn which was one of the buildings chosen to remain on the property, but was burned in an arson incident several years ago. Even though the MOA states no new buildings, as long as the actual footprint of the red barn remains the same as the plans, which are available, the Town could rebuild this structure. In addition, there are numerous grants, matching funds and other opportunities available to achieve these long-term goals. In fact, the Benson's Committee has already received two grants which the Board of Selectmen approved applications for, including rehabilitation of the train depot. Also, the Committee stressed that the prioritization list is a guideline that may be adjusted depending on opportunities which may arise, including grants, donations, etc.

The Town has taken several steps in attempt to prevent further deterioration and destruction of the property until the Town acquires the final deed from the State, including lighting, securing and alarming buildings. Hudson's DPW has worked on the property as well. The first draft deed was received by the Town from the State in 2003. Since then, the two parties have continued to negotiate to produce a final deed which is agreeable to both sides. The State has set the purchase price for the Town at \$188,000. This low price is due to a lengthy list of covenants and restrictions placed on the land by the State.

**Benson Park Update: Where are we now?**

As of summer, 2008, the Town of Hudson's attorney met with the Board of Selectmen on July 8, 2008 and was given approval to finalize the deed with the State by a vote of 4-1, with Selectman Maddox in opposition. Thus, it is now in the State's hands once again. One key portion of the deed reads, "The condition of the buildings and the property as of the date of the transfer of title to the town shall be considered the baseline for evaluating the town's responsibilities herein." The historic preservation has been one of the stumbling blocks in reaching an agreement and the most recent language used in the deed was suggested by the Department of Historic Resources. It says the Town will *endeavor*

to maintain, but doesn't strictly obligate the town to do so. DHR says it will work with the Town, they know that the buildings have continued to deteriorate over time.

The Voters of Hudson continue to support the Benson's Park project, approving monies for this purpose on at least two occasions and actively supporting clean up efforts and other work accomplished on the property.

When people remember "Benson's Wild Animal Farm," they immediately smile and recall the fun they had with their families and friends. Benson's literally put the quiet community of Hudson, New Hampshire on the map and was a treasure to Hudson and the entire State of New Hampshire. The Benson's Park project will not return the place to its glory days, but will allow the present and future residents to once again create happy family memories on the beautiful site.

Laurie Jasper

**Sources:** Remembering Benson's by Bob Goldsack, Images of America-Hudson, New Hampshire by Laurie Jasper, Town of Hudson Selectmen meeting minutes, Benson's Committee minutes, Benson's Park Master Plan produced by VHB, author's private collection of memorabilia.