

(Oct. 1990)

**United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service**

**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
REGISTRATION FORM**

1. NAME OF PROPERTY

HISTORIC NAME: Aviary at the Houston Zoo

OTHER NAME/SITE NUMBER: Flamingo Habitat at the Houston Zoo

2. LOCATION

STREET & NUMBER: 1513 N. McGregor

CITY OR TOWN: Houston

STATE: Texas

CODE: TX

COUNTY: Harris

CODE: 201

NOT FOR PUBLICATION: N/A

VICINITY: N/A

ZIP CODE: 77030

1. STATE/FEDERAL AGENCY CERTIFICATION

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended, I hereby certify that this (nomination) (request for determination of eligibility) meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property (meets) (does not meet) the National Register criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant (nationally) (statewide) (locally). (See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

Signature of certifying official

Date

State Historic Preservation Officer, Texas Historical Commission

State or Federal agency and bureau

In my opinion, the property meets does not meet the National Register criteria. (See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

Signature of commenting or other official

Date

State or Federal agency and bureau

4. NATIONAL PARK SERVICE CERTIFICATION

I hereby certify that this property is:

Signature of the Keeper

Date of Action

entered in the National Register

See continuation sheet.

determined eligible for the National Register

See continuation sheet

determined not eligible for the National Register

removed from the National Register

other (explain): _____

_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____

5. CLASSIFICATION

OWNERSHIP OF PROPERTY: Public-local

CATEGORY OF PROPERTY: Structure

NUMBER OF RESOURCES WITHIN PROPERTY:	CONTRIBUTING	NONCONTRIBUTING
	0	0 BUILDINGS
	0	0 SITES
	1	0 STRUCTURES
	0	0 OBJECTS
	1	0 TOTAL

NUMBER OF CONTRIBUTING RESOURCES PREVIOUSLY LISTED IN THE NATIONAL REGISTER: 0

NAME OF RELATED MULTIPLE PROPERTY LISTING: *Sculpture of Dionicio Rodriguez in Texas*

6. FUNCTION OR USE

HISTORIC FUNCTIONS: Recreation and Culture: Work of Art, Outdoor Recreation = zoological exhibit

CURRENT FUNCTIONS: Recreation and Culture: Work of Art, Outdoor Recreation = zoological exhibit

7. DESCRIPTION

ARCHITECTURAL CLASSIFICATION: OTHER: Faux Bois Sculpture

MATERIALS: FOUNDATION
WALLS
ROOF
OTHER CONCRETE

NARRATIVE DESCRIPTION (see continuation sheets 7-5 through 7-6).

8. STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

APPLICABLE NATIONAL REGISTER CRITERIA

- A** PROPERTY IS ASSOCIATED WITH EVENTS THAT HAVE MADE A SIGNIFICANT CONTRIBUTION TO THE BROAD PATTERNS OF OUR HISTORY.
- B** PROPERTY IS ASSOCIATED WITH THE LIVES OF PERSONS SIGNIFICANT IN OUR PAST.
- C** PROPERTY EMBODIES THE DISTINCTIVE CHARACTERISTICS OF A TYPE, PERIOD, OR METHOD OF CONSTRUCTION OR REPRESENTS THE WORK OF A MASTER, OR POSSESSES HIGH ARTISTIC VALUE, OR REPRESENTS A SIGNIFICANT AND DISTINGUISHABLE ENTITY WHOSE COMPONENTS LACK INDIVIDUAL DISTINCTION.
- D** PROPERTY HAS YIELDED, OR IS LIKELY TO YIELD, INFORMATION IMPORTANT IN PREHISTORY OR HISTORY.

CRITERIA CONSIDERATIONS: N/A

AREAS OF SIGNIFICANCE: Art

PERIOD OF SIGNIFICANCE: c.1926

SIGNIFICANT DATES: c.1926

SIGNIFICANT PERSON: N/A

CULTURAL AFFILIATION: N/A

ARCHITECT/BUILDER: Rodriguez, Dionicio

NARRATIVE STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE (see continuation sheets 8-7 through 8-9).

9. MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHIC REFERENCES

BIBLIOGRAPHY (see continuation sheets 9-10 and 9-11).

PREVIOUS DOCUMENTATION ON FILE (NPS): N/A

- preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested.
- previously listed in the National Register
- previously determined eligible by the National Register
- designated a National Historic Landmark
- recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey #
- recorded by Historic American Engineering Record #

PRIMARY LOCATION OF ADDITIONAL DATA:

- State historic preservation office (*Texas Historical Commission*)
- Other state agency
- Federal agency
- Local government
- University
- Other -- Specify Repository:

10. GEOGRAPHICAL DATA

ACREAGE OF PROPERTY: less than one acre

UTM REFERENCES	<u>Zone</u>	<u>Easting</u>	<u>Northing</u>
	15	268609	3289589

VERBAL BOUNDARY DESCRIPTION: The nomination encompasses the flamingo habitat with the sculptures, an area 132 feet long and 75 feet wide, bounded by walkways on the north, east and south and the Atwater prairie chicken habitat on the west, in the Houston Zoo at 1314 North MacGregor in Houston, Texas. The habitat is 768 feet west-southwest of the main entrance of the zoo.

BOUNDARY JUSTIFICATION: The nomination boundary is drawn to include the entire flamingo habitat which roughly corresponds to the original footprint of the aviary

11. FORM PREPARED BY (With assistance from Gregory Smith, National Register Coordinator)

NAME/TITLE: Patsy Pittman Light

ORGANIZATION: N/A

DATE: March 29, 2005

STREET & NUMBER: 300 Argyle

TELEPHONE: 210-824-5914

CITY OR TOWN: San Antonio **STATE:** Texas

ZIP CODE: 78209

ADDITIONAL DOCUMENTATION

CONTINUATION SHEETS

MAPS (see continuation sheet Map-12)

PHOTOGRAPHS (see continuation sheet Photo-22 through Photo-25)

ADDITIONAL ITEMS (see continuation sheets Figure-13 through Figure-21)

PROPERTY OWNER

NAME: City of Houston Parks and Recreation Department
(ATTN: Rick Dewees, Park Administrator for Memorial and Hermann Parks)

STREET & NUMBER: 6201 Golf Course Drive

TELEPHONE: (713) 284-8555; (713) 284-8554

CITY OR TOWN: HOUSTON **STATE:** Texas

ZIP CODE: 77030

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Aviary at the Houston Zoo
Houston, Harris County, Texas

Description

The Aviary at the Houston Zoo (now known as the flamingo habitat) is sited approximately 768 feet west-southwest of the zoo's main entrance. The wire cage of the aviary, which originally housed a variety of bird life, was destroyed by Hurricane Carla in 1961, but the remaining structure features a group of Dionicio Rodriguez-designed concrete *faux bois* sculptures, including a fountain, logs, ledges, and a *faux* rock-bordered shallow pond, adjacent to grassy habitat areas. The aviary is now the habitat of a flock of Chilean flamingos.

The 55-acre Houston Zoo is in the 445-acre Hermann Park, south of Houston's central business district and adjacent to the Texas Medical Center and Rice University. Bounded by Main, Hermann, Alameda, North MacGregor and Braes Bayou, the park's additional components include running/walking/bike trails, picnic areas, the Houston Garden Center, an 18-hole golf course, the Houston Museum of Natural Science and the Miller Outdoor Theatre. Operated under a joint agreement between the not-for-profit Houston Zoo Incorporated and the City of Houston, the zoo is home to over 3,100 animals representing 500 species.

Archival photographs of the aviary labeled the structure as a "flying cage." Fred Maier, zoo facilities manager for many years, described the scene:

The trees and the caldera (fountain) are a unique fantasy shape, and I have always admired the way the artist left hollows in the trees that have been occupied by raccoons and other wild as well as the beautiful pink coral vine. On cold mornings the warm water that flows from the caldera produces a surrealistic cloud of steam. Numerous small pools of water cascade down the face...perfect for the birds to play and shower in during hot summer days, delighted to find such a perfect spot to cool off.¹

The 132'x75' aviary, bounded by aggregate walkways on the east, north and south and by the brushy Atwater prairie chicken habitat on the west, is enclosed with a wooden rail and wire fence on the north, south and west, and a chain link and bamboo fence on the east. Surrounded by dense vegetation of sago, Mexican blue palm, jelly palm, water oak and hackberry on the eastern edge of the habitat, a realistic cement rock fountain drips water into the 30'x50' oval pool. The fountain sculpture, resembling a small mountain with a jagged surface, is 16½-foot-wide at the base and tapers to an 18-foot-high peak. Mysterious dark crevices drip "stalactites" and several "pincushion cacti" appear randomly in the "rocks." The rear of the fountain resembles a hollow tree, an oft-repeated Rodriguez design, and has two apertures which open into a 10'x 9' interior with a 12-foot ceiling. The interior space houses fountain equipment.

In 1929, Park Superintendent C.L. Bock described the waterfall as "a good representation of West Texas lava rock."² A 4-foot-high "stump" and a large "stone" are to the south of the fountain. In front of the base is a split "tree trunk" with two "branches" which peel away toward the ground. Faux rock ledges line the pool's edges, although some are partially obscured by plant growth. Approximately fifteen feet from the bank, a knurled 4-foot-high "tree stump" sits in the western end of the pool. On the right bank, a 22-foot-high bare "tree," with a 3-foot-diameter trunk and large areas of peeling

¹Maier, Fred. Emails to Patsy Light, 22 June 2004 and 25 August 2004. Interview, 3 March 2005. Monograph: "History of the Houston Zoological Gardens."

² *The Municipal Book, City of Houston 1929: 77*

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Aviary at the Houston Zoo
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bark, woodpecker holes, realistic bark texture, remnants of color and large holes, has served as the home of many birds. Zoo employees relate that a pair of wood ducks built their nest in one of the holes in the trunk. Near the tree, the pool narrows into a 2-foot-wide stream (also lined with cement rocks), and passes under a 15-foot-long wooden bridge (probably built at a later date) which is shaded by a frame pergola covered with evergreen wisteria vines. The stream travels northwest for fifty feet and small pincushion cacti are nestled in the "rocks" along its edges. A second defoliated 17-foot-tall "tree" with a 9½-foot-wide trunk, on the northern edge of the pool, exhibits large areas of original color and has roots extending out two feet from the base of the trunk. Several large holes provide shelter for small animals as well as birds. An 11-foot-long branch extends horizontally from the right side of the trunk.

In comparison to its stark appearance in the 1920s, the habitat is now luxuriantly landscaped with verdant tropical foliage, including palms, banana, umbrella plants and elephant ears, as well as viburnum, anaqua, wax myrtle, pittosporum, red-tip photinia, queen's crown, asparagus fern, wild olive, pampas grass, ligustrum, evergreen wisteria and English ivy. Although Dionicio Rodriguez built these sculptures and the pond c.1926, they are in remarkable condition and serve as witnesses to the artisan's exceptional talent in creating naturalistic surfaces and shapes.

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Statement of Significance

The c.1926 Aviary at the Houston Zoo, in Houston, Harris County, Texas is the only known zoological environment featuring the sculptural work of noted artist Dionicio Rodriguez. Rodriguez designed and built many concrete *faux bois* components, including a fountain, logs, ledges, and a *faux* rock-bordered shallow pond. The property is nominated to the National Register under Criterion C, in the areas of Art and Landscape Architecture, as an early 20th century zoo habitat featuring original works by Rodriguez, under the multiple property submission *Sculpture by Dionicio Rodriguez in Texas*.

Development of Hermann Park

With the discovery of oil at Spindletop in 1901, Humble in 1905, and Goose Creek in 1906, Houston became the center for oil and oilfield equipment. The need for a deep water port was met, beginning in 1902, when Congress appropriated \$1,000,000 for work on the Houston ship channel following the course of the Buffalo Bayou and later, in 1910 when Congress accepted a plan proposed by a group of Houston businessmen to split the cost of \$3,500,000 for the development of the channel between the City of Houston and the federal government. The new port, deepened to a depth of 25 feet, was officially opened on 10 November 1914 (McComb 1981: 67). By 1930, there were eight refineries along the ship channel. A whole group of oil barons was spawned from the income produced by this new industry, which replaced cotton as the main economic generator for the city. Among this group of men who shared their wealth for cultural and civic projects were William S. Farish, Robert Lee Blaffer, Hugh Roy Cullen and George H. Hermann.

Hermann, the son of Swiss immigrants, was born in Houston in 1843, and served in the Civil War in Texas and Louisiana with Company A of the Twenty-sixth Calvary. Oil was discovered on Hermann's 30 acres near Humble (which he had acquired by trading two mules and a wagon) and he became a millionaire. He also became involved in the cattle business and real estate. Hermann traveled widely, and once on a visit to New York City, he was hospitalized in a charity hospital, where he received poor treatment. At his recovery, he vowed he would build a charity hospital in Houston. Known for his penuriousness, Hermann traveled second class on his trips to Europe. At the time of his death in a Boston hospital (where he had gone for medical treatment in 1914), he was living in one room in the house he had built in Houston, while another family occupied the remainder of the home. At his death, the bulk of Hermann's estate, \$2.6 million, was given to the city to build and maintain Hermann Hospital in Houston.³

In 1912, Houston's mayor, Ben Campbell, hired Harvard University landscape architect, Arthur Coleman Comey, to design a city plan. Campbell realized that Rice University was attracting people to hear lectures and concerts, and that Main Street was experiencing new development. Comey suggested that the bayous were a natural green belt, and proposed that parks should be developed in rings around the city. His plan specified a park across from Rice University and that Main Street should become a boulevard. In 1887, Hermann had operated a sawmill across from the garbage dump on 284 acres on Main Street, near the edge of town, where he sold cordwood. The property was described as "a quagmire...a no-man's land," and Hermann purchased the property for 50 cents an acre.⁴ Hermann donated the land to the city on May 30, 1914, stipulating that the property be used for recreational purposes, and Mayor Campbell appointed a park board which included Hermann as one of its members. The board hired St. Louis landscape architect George Kessler

³ Tyler 1996, Vol. 3: 570

⁴ McAshan 1985: 113, 114.

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to submit plans for Hermann Park. His design included the Main Avenue traffic circle at the entrance to the park and the planting of double rows of live oak trees from the 5600 to the 6400 block. Comey's original vision of transforming a country road into a "great boulevard" was realized, and Hermann Park officially opened on July 4, 1915.⁵

Development of the Houston Zoo

In 1899, the City of Houston purchased 16 acres of west-side land for \$26,000, which became the first city park, Sam Houston Park.⁶ By 1905, the park had several animals, including a black bear, raccoons, prairie dogs and monkeys, and in 1914, the site was officially declared the city's zoo. In 1920, the federal government gave the Houston Zoo a bison named "Earl" from one of the herds being thinned in national parks, sparking renewed public interest in the zoo. The city council then purchased a female bison, and when she died, the Camp Street Fishing Club donated a deer to serve a companion to Earl. By 1921, the collection of animals had grown: some were gifts, while others were purchased, including some from a circus. In 1922, the zoo moved to a 34-acre site in Hermann Park, surrounded by an "animal tight ornamental fence."⁷ On January 7, 1925, the zoo announced plans to build three permanent buildings including the "bird cage." According to the newspaper article, the cage was to be:

fifty feet high, 75 feet wide and 150 feet long. It will be shaped like a half barrel cut from top to bottom. It will have a steel frame and galvanized pipe ribs, covered with 1½ inch steel mesh. It will cost about \$7600. It will be mostly used for the larger birds, only mostly waterfowl, like herons, cranes, pelicans and gulls. A little stream will fall down a rock cascade and spread out into a natural pool for the birds to wade and swim in.⁸

An early aerial photograph of the zoo area in the park, still denuded of native trees from the saw-mill operation, reveals five structures including the Museum of Natural History and the aviary.

Dionicio Rodriguez's Work at the Houston Zoo

The first documented reference to Dionicio Rodriguez as the artisan who created the sculpture in the aviary is found in two articles written in 1936 for the Federal Writers Project, which were later edited for inclusion in *Houston, A History and Guide*. One of the researchers, Julia Jones, wrote that the aviary

...is the 3rd largest bird cage in the U.S. There 2 are in N.Y. and St. Louis; even they do not have normal, practical facilities of Hermann Zoo bird cage. Pool, fountain flowing over rocks, trees and other objects arranged to give bird inhabitants natural surroundings. D. Rodriguez of Mex. City, artist in cement, made artificial post-oak stump that painted, looks as if it had come from deep woods. Used 2 tons cement.

⁵ Johnston 1991:185, 193, 194

⁶ *Houston Daily Post* 1899: 11

⁷ Federal Writers Project. *Houston, A History and Guide* (1942): pp. 312, 313, 314.

⁸ *Houston Chronicle*. "City to Spend More Than 33,000 on Improvements at Hermann Park This Year." January 7, 1925.

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Within this cage live flamingoes (sic) pelicans, storks, pair black swans, 2 pair white Chinese geese, Australian coreopsis goose, pair Reeves pheasants and smaller birds.⁹

Archival photographs and a postcard illustrate that there was a straw *palapa* (hut with straw bundled roof) and two miniature buildings (used as bird houses) in the aviary. An additional photograph from the collection of Rodriguez's niece, Manuela Theall, reveals the fountain, a portion of the steel cage and pond and one of the bare "tree trunks," exhibit hand-written inscriptions: "Made by Dionicio Rodriguez."

Documentation in previous National Register listings for Rodriguez's work indicates that the artisan received many of his commissions through recommendations from former clients. A letter from Rodriguez's first client in the United States, Dr. A.A. Urrutia of San Antonio, to the "Mayor of Houston" dated November 24, 1925 reads, "I take myself the liberty to introduce to your consideration Dionisio (sic) Rodriguez, of whom I had the opportunity to tell you about, when sending the letter."¹⁰ Based on the date of this letter, it can be assumed that Rodriguez was hired by the City of Houston to build the cement sculptures inside the aviary soon thereafter in 1926. The "hollow stump" and the bare "tree trunks" share a kinship with the "hollow tree" gate at Dr. Urrutia's beloved Miraflores in San Antonio (1924), as well as sculptures in later works, in Memorial Park Cemetery in Memphis, Tennessee (1930s), Cedar Hill Cemetery in Suitland, Maryland (1937), Elmwood Cemetery in Birmingham, Alabama (1938), Lakewood Park in North Little Rock, Arkansas (1930s) and at the Froman House in Clayton, New Mexico (c1934). The fountain in the Houston zoo, largest of those built anywhere by Rodriguez, features dripping stalactites similar to those on the fountain at Eddingston Court in Port Arthur, Texas (1929). The aviary inspired at least two artistic endeavors: in 1938, *Civics for Houston* featured a painting by McNeil Davidson, "The Bird Haunt," on its cover, and the same issue features a poem of the same title by Emily Langham (see figures 8 and 9).

Although the aviary cage was destroyed in the 1961 by Hurricane Carla and the zoo has progressed through numerous renovations, the Rodriguez pieces remain intact after 80 years in their original site and are in excellent condition. The Dionicio Rodriguez-designed work for the aviary in the Houston Zoo is nominated to the National Register of Historic Places under Criterion C, in the area of Art, as a unique and significant work of art by the noted *faux bois* sculptor. This work, along with his previously nominated sculptures executed for the City of San Antonio, are the only known Rodriguez works commissioned by municipalities.

⁹ Julia Jones. "Houston, Texas, District 6, Points of Interest: Hermann Park Zoo." WPA Writers' Project. Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library.

¹⁰ Letter fragment dated 1925 in the collection *Carlos Cortes*. The remainder of the letter is missing.

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Houston, Harris County, Texas

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Tyler, Ron. ed. et. al. *New Handbook of Texas*, Volume 3. Austin, Texas: The Texas Historical Association, 1996. pp. 570, 721, 722.

Urrutia, Dr. A. A. Letter to the Mayor of Houston, 24 November, 1925. Courtesy of Carlos Cortes.

Winn, Eliza Jane and Julia Jones. "Houston, Texas, District 6, Points of Interest: Hermann Park Zoo." WPA Writers' Project. Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library.

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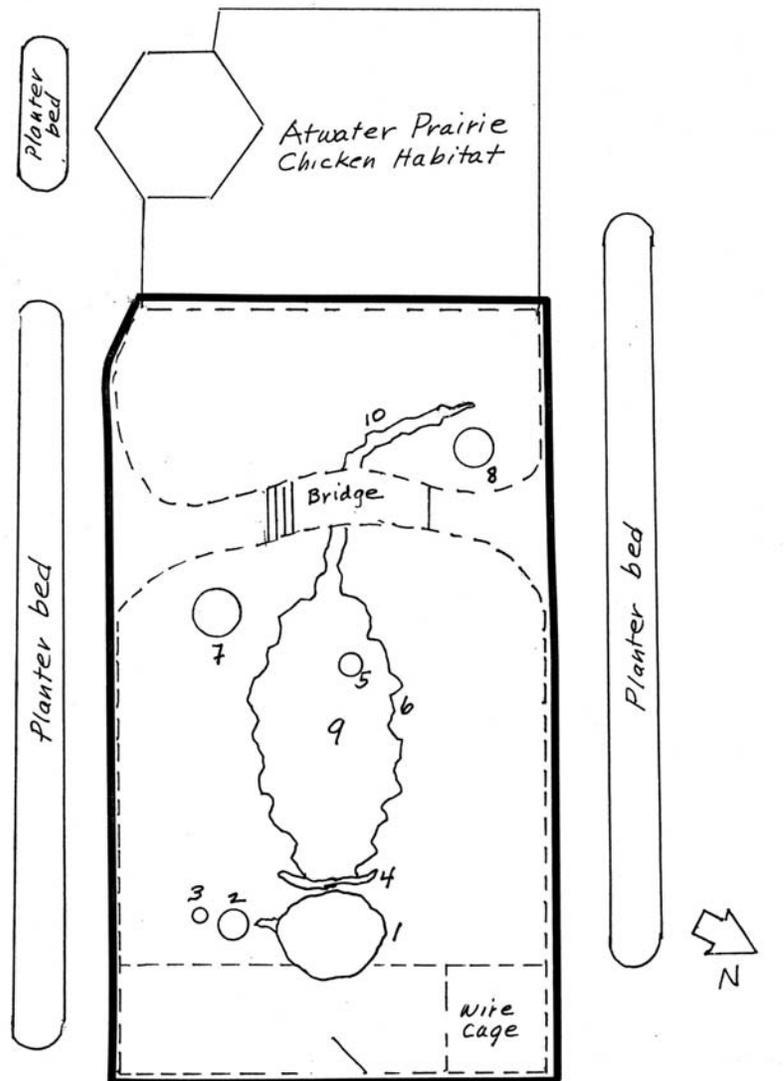
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Aviary at the Houston Zoo
Houston, Harris County, Texas

Map 1

Aviary site map drawn by Patsy Light (not to scale): March 2005.



*Dionicio Rodriguez's Sculptures
for the Houston Zoo Aviary*

- 1. Fountain
- 2. Large Rock
- 3. Small Rock
- 4. Split Log
- 5. Hollow Stump

- 6. Rock Ledges
- 7. Tall Bare Tree
- 8. Tall Bare Tree
- 9. Pool
- 10. Stream

— Boundary
--- Fence

Not to scale

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Aviary at the Houston Zoo
Houston, Harris County, Texas

Figure 1

Photograph of aviary, unknown date. Courtesy of Manuela Vargas Theall



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Aviary at the Houston Zoo
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Figure 2

“Photo: Houston Zoo under Construction, Circa 1922.” From Houston Zoo website: [www. Houstonzoo.org](http://www.Houstonzoo.org)



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Aviary at the Houston Zoo
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Figure 3

“Stump with crane.” Rear of photograph reads “City of Houston Park (sic) Department; Serial No. Z129; Date: 10-27; Park: Zoo.; Subject: Scene in Flying Cage; Ordered by CL; Photo by: K.” Courtesy of Brian Hill, Director of Public Affairs, Houston Zoo.



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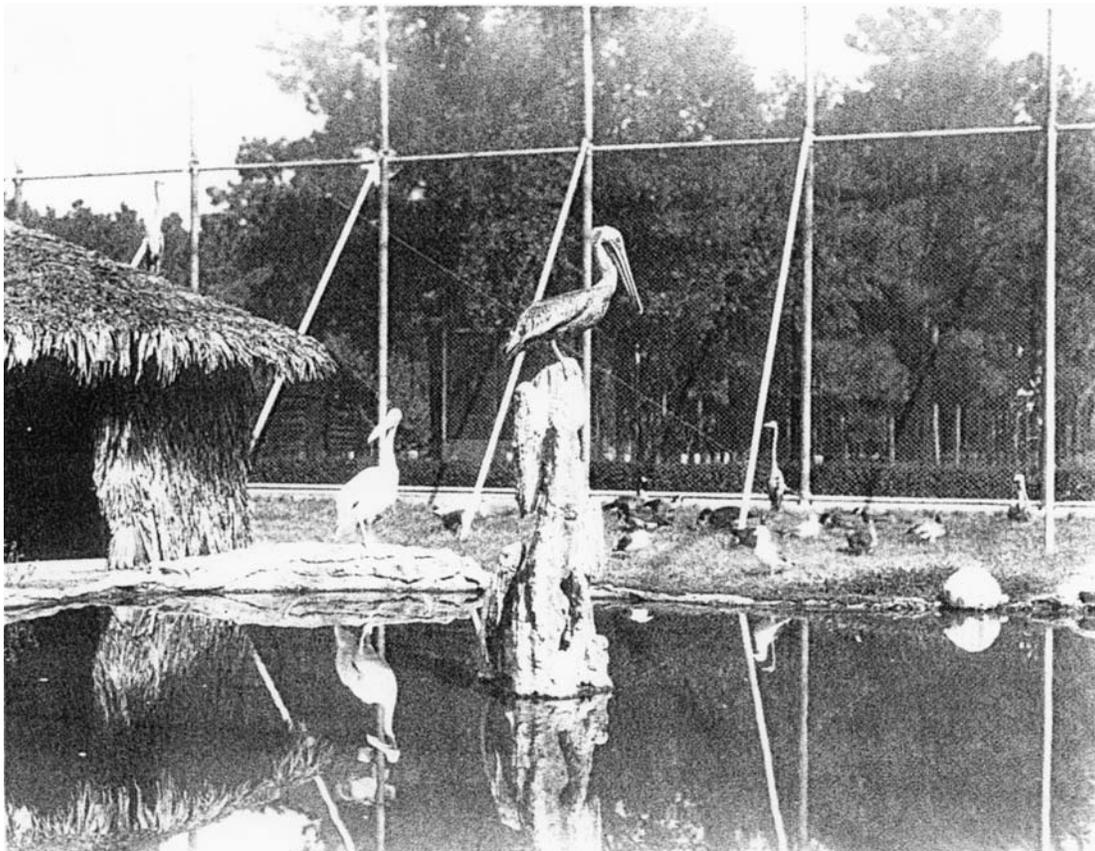
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Aviary at the Houston Zoo
Houston, Harris County, Texas

Figure 4

Interior of aviary. Rear of photograph reads "City of Houston Park (sic) Department, Serial No. Z177; Date 9 23 28; Park: Hermann Zoo; Subject: Flying Cage; Feature:-----; Ordered By C; Photo By: K (or R)." Courtesy of Brian Hill, Director of Public Affairs, Houston Zoo.



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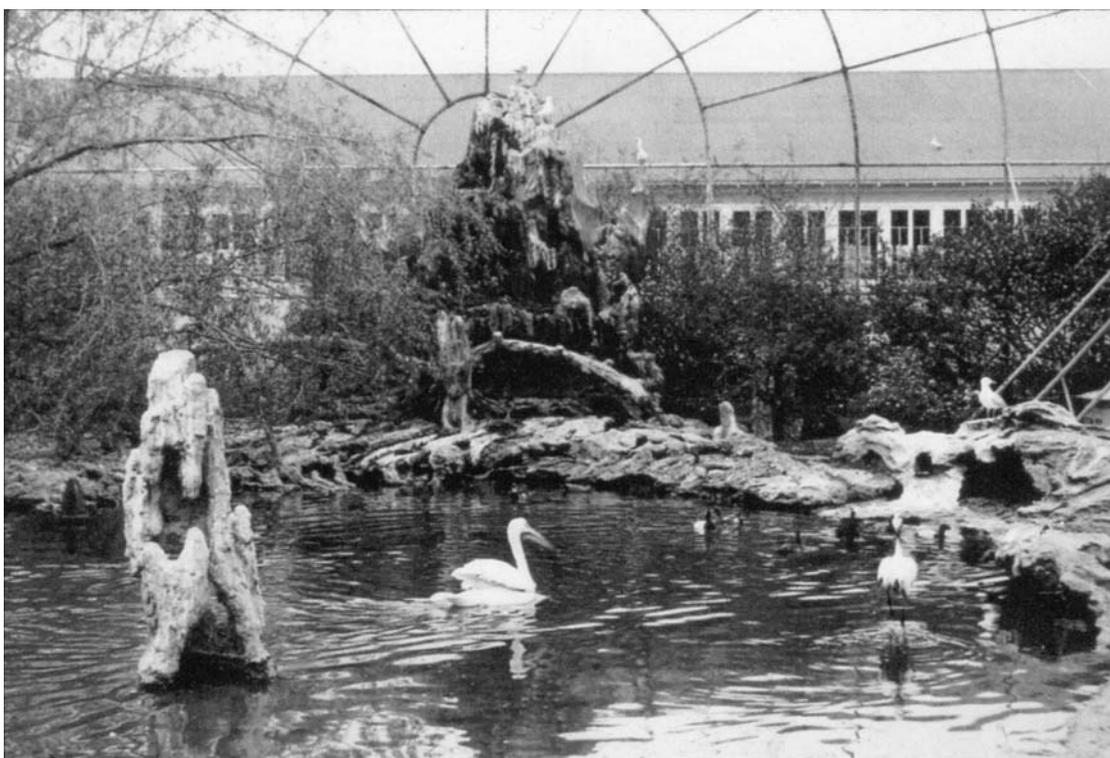
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Figure 5

Interior of aviary with stump and pelican in foreground, 1933. Courtesy of Fred Maier. (also published in *The Houston Chronicle* Art Gravure Section, April 1933.)



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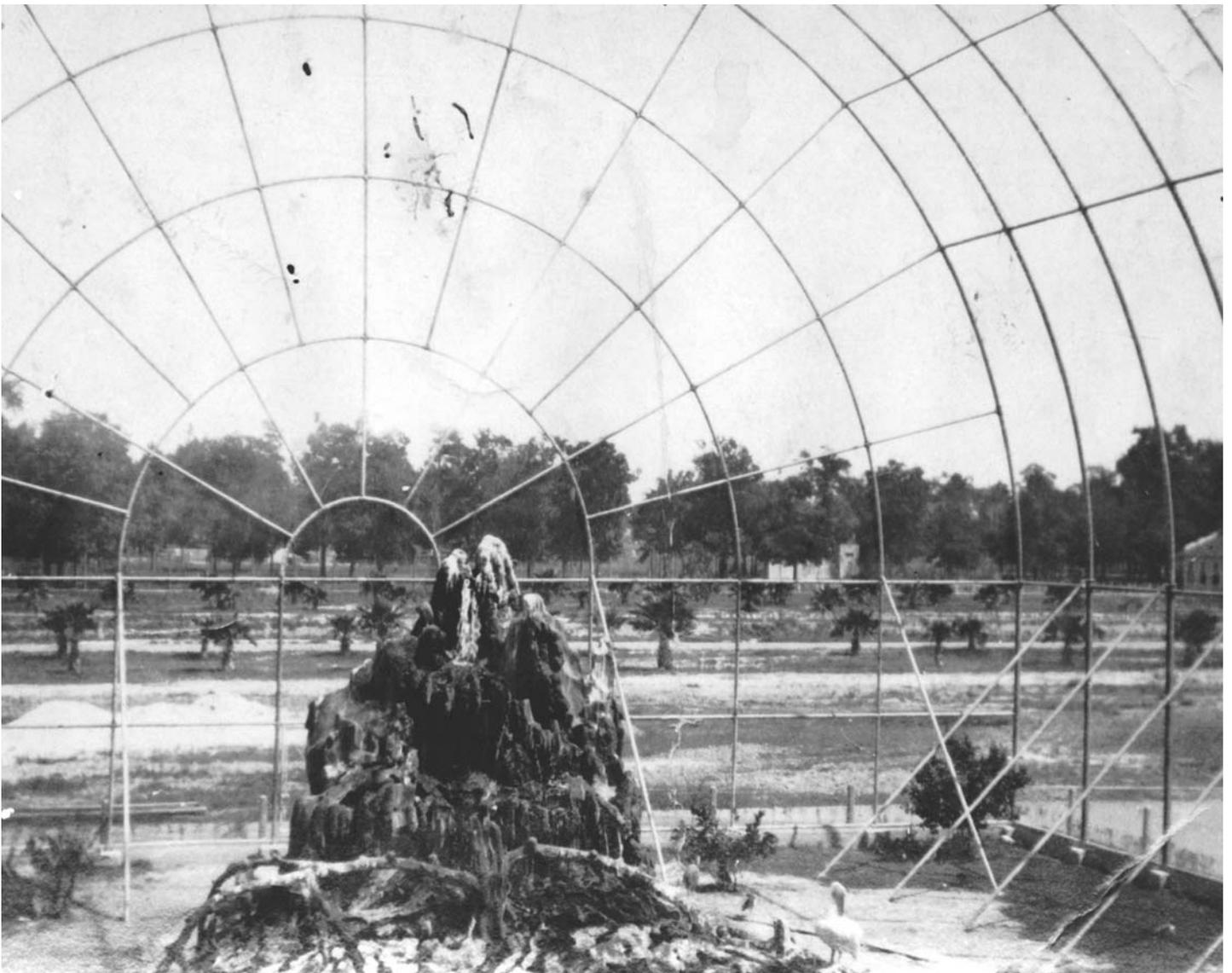
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Aviary at the Houston Zoo
Houston, Harris County, Texas

Figure 6

Interior of aviary with fountain and split tree. No date. Courtesy of Carlos Cortes. (Included small photocopy and enlargement)



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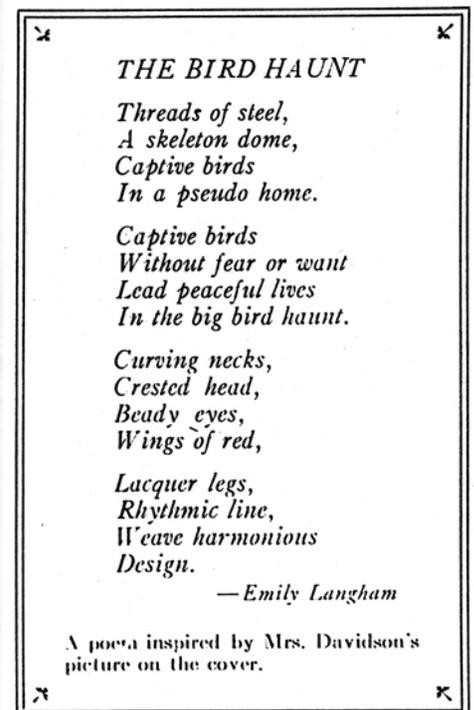
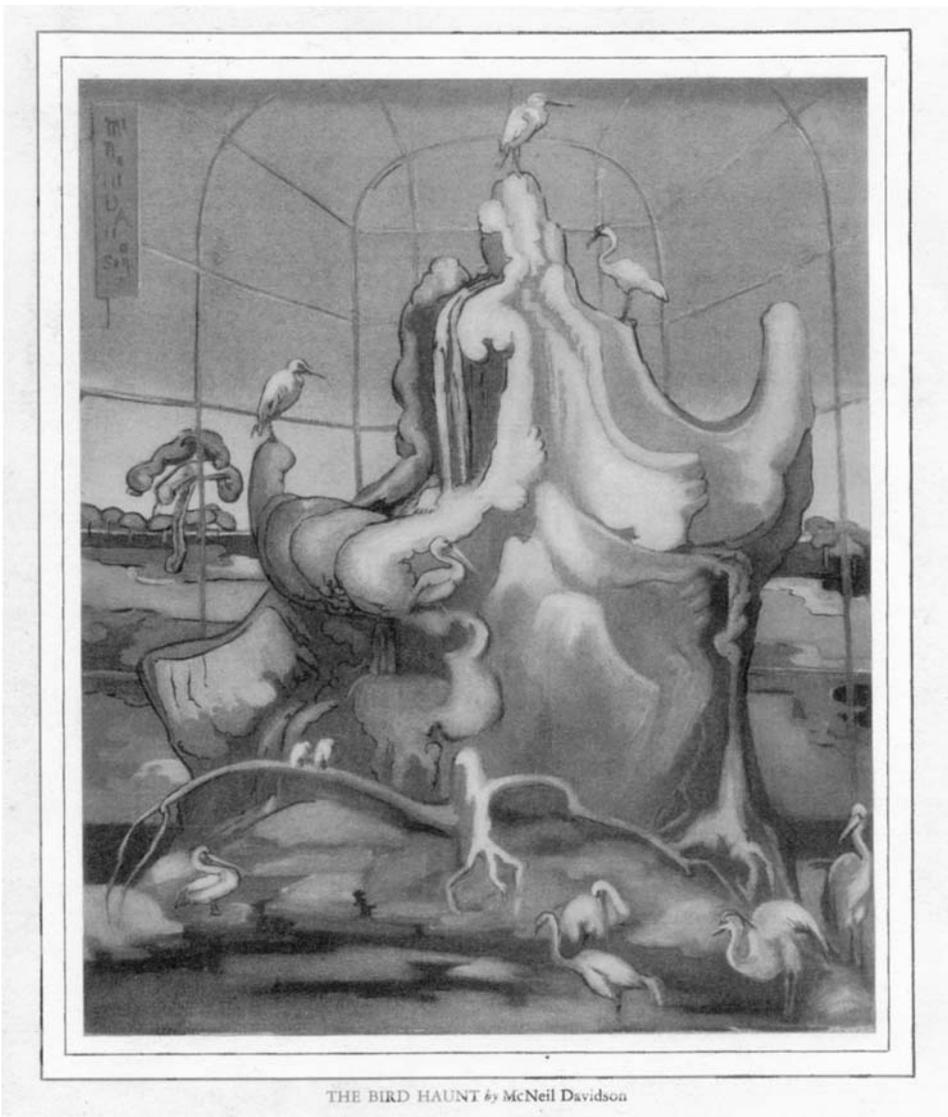
Aviary at the Houston Zoo
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Figure 8

"The Bird Haunt." Poem by Emily Langham. *Civics for Houston*: June 1928.

Figure 9

"The Bird Haunt." Painting by McNeil Davidson. Cover of *Civics for Houston*; June 1928.



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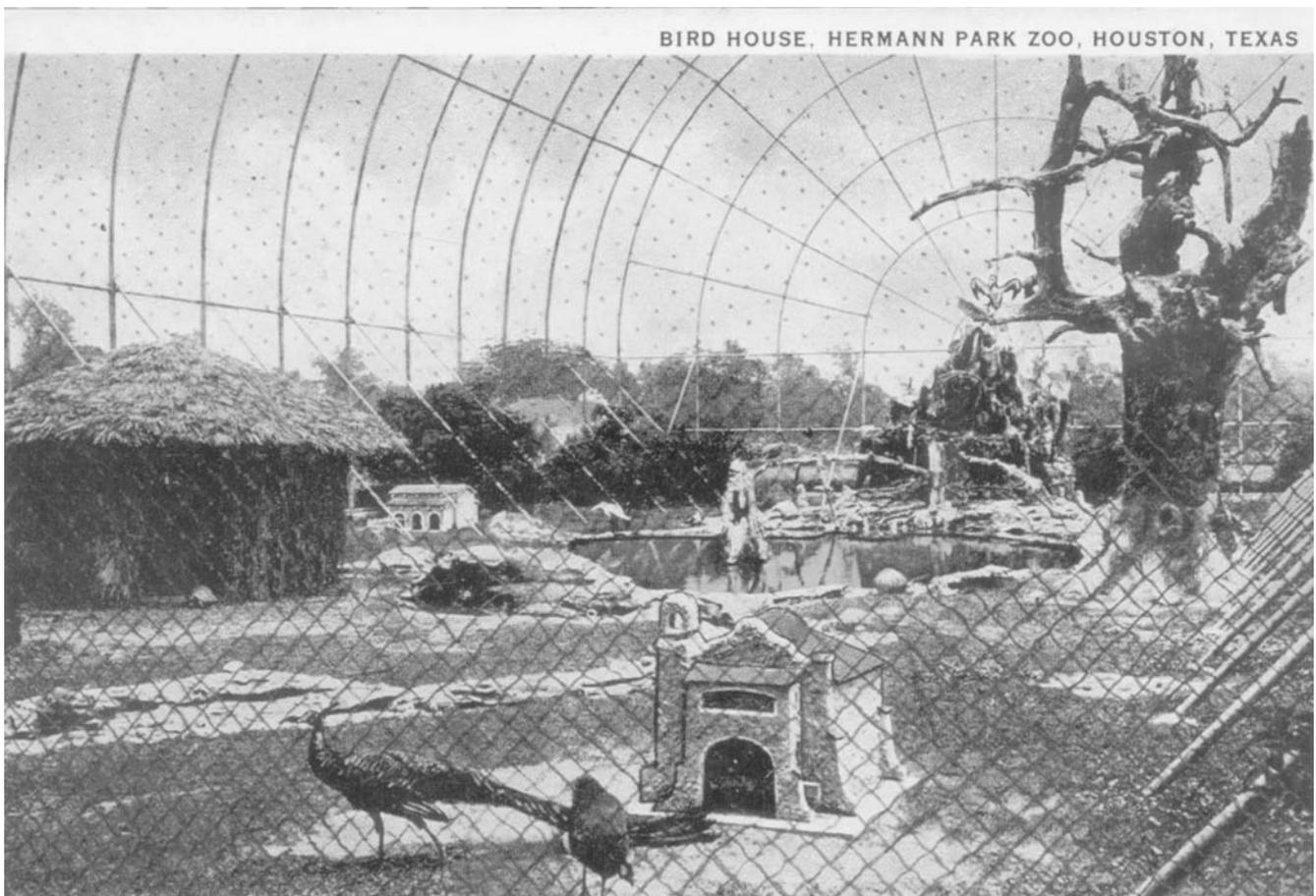
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Aviary at the Houston Zoo
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Figure 10

“Bird House, Hermann Park Zoo, Houston, Texas.” Postcard: Courtesy of Rick Barongi, Director of the Houston Zoo. Published by Seawall Specialty Co., Houston and Galveston, Texas.



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Aviary at the Houston Zoo
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Photograph Log

Aviary at the Houston Zoo
1513 North MacGregor
Houston, Harris County, Texas
Photographed by Myssie Light Acomb, March 2005 (unless noted)
Original negatives with Patsy Light



Photo 1
Aviary pond
Camera facing northeast
Photograph by Patsy Light
October 29, 2005



Photo 2
Fountain
Camera facing northeast

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Aviary at the Houston Zoo
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Photo 3
Fountain
Camera facing northeast



Photo 4
Split "tree stump"
Camera facing southeast



Photo 5
"Hollow stump"
Camera facing northeast

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Aviary at the Houston Zoo
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Photo 6
Stream with "rock" banks
Camera facing northwest



Photo 7
Pincushion "cactus" along stream
Camera facing northwest



Photo 8
Horizontal "branch" from tree
Camera facing west

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

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Aviary at the Houston Zoo
Houston, Harris County, Texas



Photo 9
"Root" detail from tree
Camera facing west