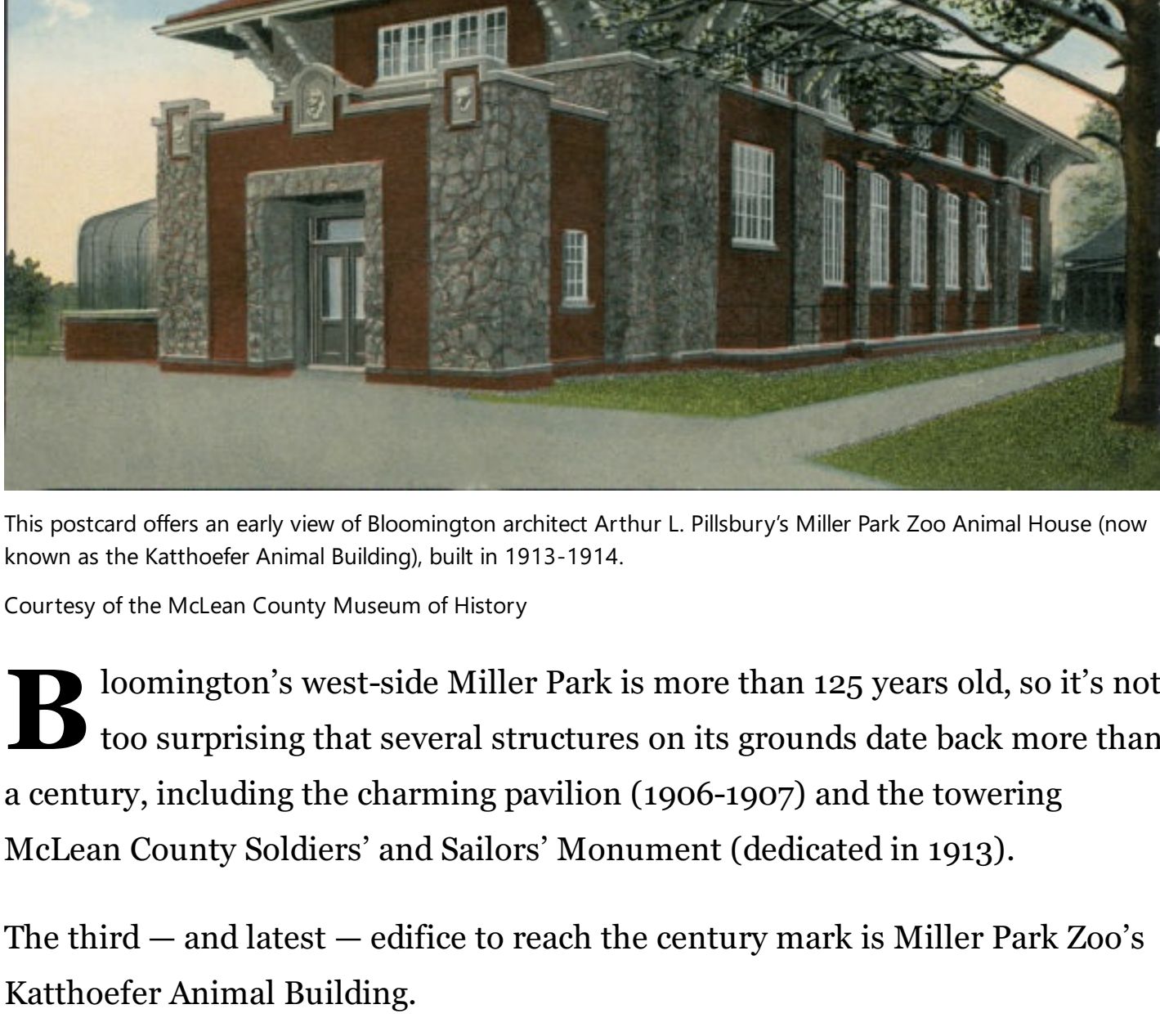


Zoo’s iconic Katthoefer Animal Building a century old

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This postcard offers an early view of Bloomington architect Arthur L. Pillsbury's Miller Park Zoo Animal House (now known as the Katthoefer Animal Building), built in 1913-1914.

Courtesy of the McLean County Museum of History

Bloomington's west-side Miller Park is more than 125 years old, so it's not too surprising that several structures on its grounds date back more than a century, including the charming pavilion (1906-1907) and the towering McLean County Soldiers' and Sailors' Monument (dedicated in 1913).

The third — and latest — edifice to reach the century mark is Miller Park Zoo's Katthoefer Animal Building.

Interestingly, the zoo's exact origins remain lost to time. A master plan created shortly after the park's establishment in 1887-1888 makes no mention of animal cages or pens, let alone a zoo. Yet it's safe to say that over the next several decades the early "zoo" evolved from the happenstance of penning up a few woodland animals to one with wider, more permanent aspirations. By the late 1890s, according to one source, the park's growing menagerie included monkeys, an eagle, wolf, tiger, bear and a buffalo.

One of the early attractions was a lion known as "Big Jim," said to have escaped from a circus wagon when he was a cub and sold by an area farmer to the zoo. (Unsurprisingly, accounts of this colorful story vary widely.) At any rate, the beloved Jim passed away on March 26, 1912, and although there had been talk earlier of a much-needed animal house, it was this death that galvanized local support for such an ambitious project.

Consequently, on Jan. 17, 1913, Park Commissioner W.H. Hunter submitted to the Bloomington City Council several architectural drawings of a proposed "Animal House" (as the building was first called) by local architect Arthur L. Pillsbury. Although these designs differed somewhat from the finished building, the basic floor plan remained unchanged — a cavernous central hallway (or "promenade") flanked on one side by a row of indoor cages, with those connected to a corresponding row of outdoor cages.

Pillsbury, one of Central Illinois' most prolific and admired architects, counted some 700 projects to his name. Locally, Pillsbury buildings include Bent Elementary School, Illinois Wesleyan University's Memorial Gymnasium (since renamed the Hansen Center), and many of the large residences on the north side of Washington Street east of Towanda Avenue.

City officials expected the Animal House to cost something like \$15,000. In late March 1913, Fred Garling & Son came in with the lowest of four bids — \$22,870 — though later the city negotiated down to \$21,970. Further mechanical work pushed the final price tag to \$29,690, or more like \$700,000 today, adjusted for inflation.

Pillsbury's Prairie Style-design was partly influenced by Dwight H. Perkins' South Pond Refectory (now known as Café Brauer) at Lincoln Park Zoo in Chicago. It was Pillsbury's intention that the building's naturalistic design elements, especially the generous use of decorative stone, mirror that of the nearby Miller Park Pavilion, a harmonizing effect now partly lost due to the zoo fence obscuring the Animal House from the park side.

The old animal cages (or, better yet, "sheds") were taken down to make way for the new building, and the animals relocated to temporary quarters. On April 15, 1913, the three Miller Park commissioners ceremoniously staked out ground for the new building and excavation work got underway the following day.

The Animal House's public opening was scheduled for Feb. 28, 1914, the first time the lights were to be turned on. "The lions, monkeys, alligators and all of the animals in the old cages, have been transferred to the new quarters and the park commissioners are now endeavoring to secure additional animals," reported The Pantagraph. Yet due to last-minute delays involving wiring and the ventilation system, the opening occurred about a week later.

For many years Bloomington's municipal parsimoniousness hamstrung the zoo, and with too few public dollars basic upkeep of the Animal House was sometimes a struggle. In late 1959, for example, State Farm donated to the zoo a used boiler from its McClun Street warehouse for use in the building.

In many ways, Miller Park Zoo's modern era (and with it better days to come) dates to 1961 and the completion of the Woodland Wing, the first significant expansion project since the Animal House opened 47 years earlier. The zoo is now nationally accredited and participates in animal exchange programs with institutions in the U.S. and abroad. Today's zoo, with its professionalism, educational programs and awareness of issues ranging from biodiversity to ethology (animal behavior), bares little resemblance to its former self a century ago.

In 1977, the old Animal House was renamed the Katthoefer Animal Building after brothers John G. (Grover) and William Katthoefer. Grover was the park superintendent for more than a decade, while William assisted his brother and also served as the longtime zookeeper.

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