

## “The Ostriches”

*The ostrich races yesterday at Coronado track were witnessed by quite a crowd. Napoleon, the famous sprinter . . . drew a buggy weighing 280 pounds and a man weighing 137 pounds, but in spite of the handicap made a half-mile in a few seconds over two minutes. He was paced by a man on a bicycle. The sight was a novel one.*

--San Diego Union, May 25, 1896.

The world’s largest birds had fascinated San Diegans since they first appeared in town in January 1884. The ostriches had been brought from South Africa by E. J. Johnson, manager of the recently formed American Ostrich Company. Johnson hoped to raise the birds on a San Diego ranch and sell their valuable feathers, which were rapidly becoming a popular women’s fashion accessory.

The entrepreneur found a vacant horse corral at 8<sup>th</sup> and L Streets to quarter his ostriches as they recuperated from their ocean voyage from Cape Town followed by a railroad journey from New Orleans. Johnson shopped for a suitable ranch site and soon bought an eighty acre parcel of rural land below Fallbrook in a town called Mount Fairview (today’s Bonsall).

While Johnson constructed his new ranch, San Diegans flocked to the corral to see the seven to nine-foot tall, flightless birds. Johnson charged visitors 50 cents each to see the exotic creatures, “not for the purpose of making money,” he explained, “but to keep away a crowd, who are apt to injure the birds by pulling their feathers.”

Johnson’s birds were hardly crowd-friendly. As one observer noted: “Far from being timid creatures, burying their heads in the sand in the foolish manner ascribed to them at the approach of danger, they show great excitement at the presence of strangers, the males advancing with flashing eyes and wings defiantly projecting upwards, and ready to battle to the death.”

The newspapers were captivated, deciding that even ostrich egg production was newsworthy. “One of the ostriches dropped an egg yesterday—the first since their arrival here,” announced the *Union*. “It measured eighteen inches in circumference the long way and fourteen the short. That would make a pretty good starter for an egg breakfast.”

Chefs from the first-class Florence Hotel on Fir Street bought eggs from Johnson to serve to guests. “We don’t believe that ‘ostrich eggs boiled’ ever appeared on any hotel dinner bill—at least until yesterday,” the *Union* reported. “The guests, without exception, pronounced them to be of a delicate flavor, much better than hen eggs.”



In late April, Johnson's ostriches were loaded on a train to Oceanside, and then moved by truck to their new home at Mount Fairview. Neighbors within a radius of twenty miles of the farm were invited to a two-day open house.

Johnson's property would be only the second ostrich farm established in America. Only months earlier, Dr. Charles J. Sketchley, an English ostrich farmer from South Africa, had begun raising African ostriches at a ranch in Anaheim. That flock would soon move to South Pasadena.

The ostriches at Mount Fairview thrived in the north county climate, which was similar to the bird's original Cape Town environment. One observer described the ostrich farm as "a bit of Africa dropped down between the hills." With chicks produced from incubators the original herd tripled in size in two years, making it the largest ostrich farm in the United States.

A branch farm started in Coronado in 1887 with one original African pair and thirteen of their California progeny. A contract signed between Johnson and Coronado Beach Company gave the American Ostrich Company a half block on A Avenue between Ninth and Tenth Streets. The ostrich corral would be a popular feature at Coronado Beach for several years.

Visitors particularly enjoyed the ostrich racing at Coronado. The public was astonished to see the ungainly looking birds running at up to 45 miles per hour.

Guests were also given a chance to feed the big birds. Ostriches lived on a diet of grain and vegetables but favorites included cabbages and beets, which people would toss skyward for the birds to grab. An ostrich will "swallow almost anything not too large," a reporter noted, "stones, glass, old leather, or whatever comes his way."



It took four or five years for an ostrich to mature but the plucking of their valuable feathers began at ninth months and continued every nine months thereafter. Raw or undressed feathers sold for as little as \$25 a pound and as high as \$250. The birds themselves were valued at \$1,000 per pair.

In 1893, E. J. Johnson proudly presented thirty-five of his San Diego flock at the Chicago World's Fair. When the fair concluded in the

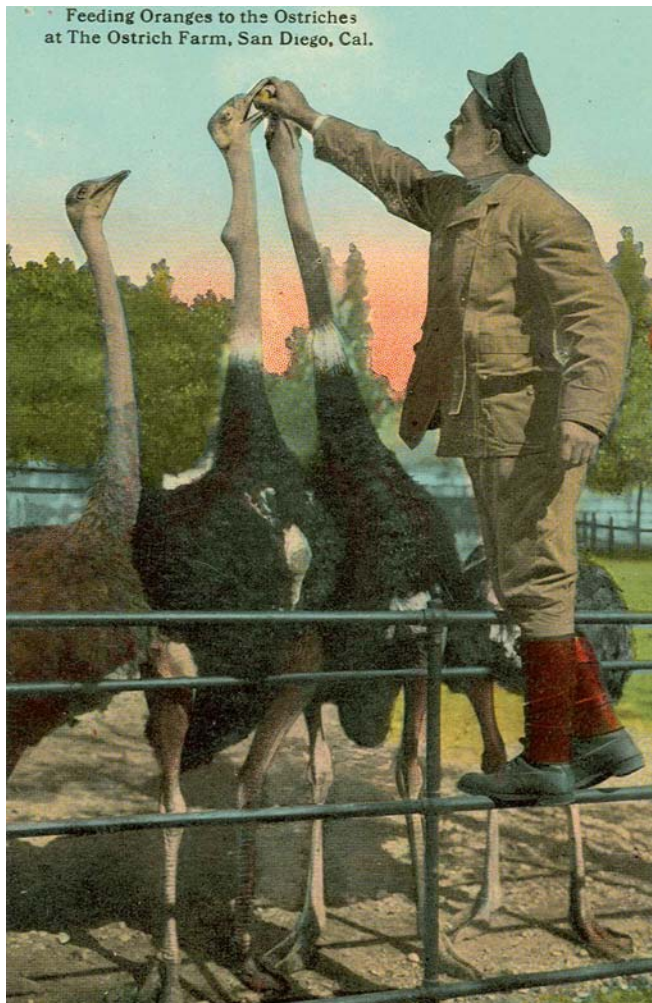
fall, the birds traveled to London where they wintered at the Royal Aquarium at Winchester. Another world's fair appearance followed in Antwerp, Belgium that summer. The San Diego ostriches were then sold to the Hagenbeck Zoo in Hamburg, Germany.

In the early 1900s, San Diego's W. H. "Harvey" Bentley took over the business from the American Ostrich Company. Bentley would move the ostriches to Mission Cliff Gardens--a botanical garden and zoo at the end of Park Blvd., overlooking Mission Valley.

Now far tamer than their Cape Town forbears, Bentley's ostriches were hand fed and even ridden by visitors. A store at the entrance to Bentley's Ostrich Farm sold feathers, and eggs—both fresh and blown.

The exhibit value of ostriches was fortunate for Bentley and other investors because in 1914 the world market for ostrich plumage crashed. With the coming of World War I, as American and European women entered the workforce, utilitarian clothing replaced the flamboyant fashions of the early 1900s. Newly austere headgear for women did not include ostrich plumed hats.

A few prominent farms survived for a time. The Cawston family, which operated a long-running ostrich attraction in Pasadena, ran an exhibit at San Diego's Panama-California Exposition in 1915. And the ostriches at Mission Cliff Gardens survived until the gardens closed in 1929, with many of the birds going to the San Diego Zoo.



Postcard of the ostrich farm at the Panama-California Exposition, 1915.  
Illustrations are from the postcard collection of Special Collections, *San Diego Public Library*

---

Originally published as "Ostriches were an exotic attraction," by Richard Crawford in the *San Diego Union-Tribune*, June 26, 2010. p. CZ.1