

Excerpt taken from *My Seven Year's in Captivity: Tails and Misadventures in the San Diego Zoo* by Bill Seaton

For more information visit: [www.BillSeaton.com](http://www.BillSeaton.com)

## CLAWED BY A LION

It was in the Children's Zoo that I, personally, made national news for the first and only time in my career.

Our African lions, Lucifer and Leonore, had provided us with a new litter, but Leonore rejected one little male, as wild mothers sometimes do. He was taken from her and assigned a glass-fronted exhibit in the Kiddie Zoo as "Dandy" Lion.

I couldn't stay away from him. All my boyhood I had dreamed of having a lion cub – or a whole litter. I hadn't actively thought much about it as an adult, but it must have still been down there in the subconscious. I even saw "Born Free" three times.

So I grew a little sappy about Dandy, a stargazer (disease common in the cat family – thought to be a vitamin deficiency – which causes the animal to twist its head grotesquely to the side from time to time and stare upward). He was fed the usual ration of milk, ground hamburger and vitamins and pushed around the zoo several times a day in a shopping cart lined with a red blanket. I stopped as often as time permitted to rub Dandy's head and let him chomp on my hand, even though it meant I had to go through a brief siege of sneezing and itchy eyes.

One Friday, I brought my four-year-old dynamo, Gary, out to pose for a private color picture with the golden cub. I planned to send the photo to Mom, who was still having some little difficulty adjusting to the fact that her number one son, the writer, had allied with five thousand dangerous wild animals and actually hoped to eke out a living

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by publicizing them. I hoped a pictorial demonstration of the healthful, happy atmosphere we were in would help her over the hump.

My wife managed to click off several shots without dropping the camera, but not before Dandy pounced on the back of my hand like he was in training for antelope kills. The friendly attack left two long scratches. I later doctored the minor wounds back at the office and would have forgotten about them.

But Monday the morning newspaper's friendly columnist, Frank Rhoades, called. "What's new with the animals, kid?" he began.

Frank liked show biz items (having once been a Hollywood flack), juicy gossip about local citizenry and "I'll be darned-type" anecdotes. But his personal hang-up was on "sick" news. He was often the first to tell that Charlie so-and-so, head of the Red Star Tuna Corp., fell off the balcony while barbecuing Saturday night and broke two legs, an arm and his clavicle. He couldn't resist heart attacks on the golf course, grievous injuries to favorite businessmen and like that.

So, when I couldn't think of anything newsy which had happened recently to anyone at the zoo, I said, "Nothing much going, Frank. Except that I was clawed by a lion Friday."

He almost came through the phone. "Wha --you were what?"

"Whoa, now," I cautioned before he had to write about his own heart attack. "It was just a cub – in the Children's Zoo."

It appeared as the lead item in his column the next day.

But that wasn't the end of it.

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One of the wire services apparently picked it up – but somehow left out the kicker about it being a cub.

I didn't know it until Frank Bonnet, the security chief, returned later in the week from vacation. "Hey, how's the hand?" he wanted to know when I ran into him at the zoo entrance. "I was reading about you the other morning in the Boston paper,".

"Me? In Boston?"

"Got it right here." He whipped out a clipping. A one-paragraph filler, it read:

"San Diego Zoo public relations man Bill Seaton was severely clawed on the hand by a lion yesterday while attempting to take a photograph."

I found the nearest phone and called Mom again before she read it.

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