

**ZELTA VITURA
WHITLOCK
DAVIS
1919-2001**



**COOLEST
ANNIVERSARY
GIFT
EVER**

Jewelry is usually the perfect anniversary gift but Hugh Davis thought perhaps his wife Zelta would rather have a massive whale built on their family pond because she was such an avid collector of whale figurines. Due to his ingenuity, Catoosa's Blue Whale is still a historic stop on Route 66.

Zelta Vitura Whitlock was born in December 1919 in Sallisaw. She spent summers in the country and winters in the city. In 1938, the energetic redhead widow met Mohawk Zoo director Hugh Davis at a dance in Cain's Ballroom and married him three months later on September 7th.

In 1940, the Davises traveled around making presentations about Africa's mountains and Central America's coral reef. During their reptile shows, Zelta entered with eight to ten indigo, bull or coach whip snakes around her body. Crowds fell in love with the pretty girl who had no fear. Zelta proved she was photogenic as well as daring. Local newspapers and national magazines displayed photos of her babying baboons, bottle-feeding bears or raising chimps. Many of the pictures showed her draped in snakes.

When Hugh retired from the Tulsa Zoo in 1966, he opened Nature's Acres. It included the A.R.K. (Animal Reptile Kingdom) with a snake corral and alligator farm around a two-story wooden ark for concessions and parties. Area residents simply called it the Catoosa Alligator Ranch. When a 200-pound alligator disappeared, Hugh decided the gators had to go. Nature's Acres became a proper swimming hole charging fifty cents a dip but the kids wanted a place to "jump off".

Hugh designed a whale twenty feet by eighty feet. Its iron skeleton took a hundred hours to weld. When he started putting all this pipe into the lake, Zelta questioned what he was building. He just smiled and said, "I'm working on something". It took 70-year-old Hugh nearly 3,000 hours to carry 126 bags of concrete up ladders in five-gallon buckets. Patrons entered the Blue Whale with the little hat through its open mouth, walked across wooden planking to access water slides extended from the whale's sides, scaled a ladder inside its head to a loft windowed with portholes, and climbed to an elevated diving board in its tail.

Hugh presented the surprise anniversary gift to Zelta for their 34th anniversary. Soon the happy whale with the toothy smile became the centerpiece of Nature's Acres. The roadside attraction added picnic tables with brightly-painted cement whales and barrels and a bathroom shaped like an African village structure. They hired lifeguards and began to charge a small fee.

In 1988 the park closed due to Hugh's crippling arthritis; he died in 1990. Over the years, the effects of nature took a devastating toll with overgrown foliage and the pond turning into murky brown swamp. But Route 66 enthusiasts still sought out the site.

Zelta died in 2001, but the community refused to let their local landmark fade away. The Hampton Inn employees launched a fund-raising effort and the volunteer group Fins of the Blue Whale, formed in 2009, continues to maintain the 14-acre property.

Though a major attraction on Route 66, history often forgets it was originally built as an intimate offering of the heart between Hugh and Zelta Davis to retell their story. In 2010, Time Magazine named the Blue Whale of Catoosa as one of America's Top 50 Roadside Attractions.