“Lions and Tigers and Bears, Oh My!”

At times throughout our history the White House has looked like something out of Oz or the Jungle Book. Almost all of our presidents have had domesticated pets but none ever graced the White House lawns during the presidencies of Millard Fillmore, Franklin Pierce or Chester Alan Arthur.

In addition to the the usual assortment of horses, dogs and/or cats, several of our first families have enjoyed the company of exotic pets.

President Lincoln had ordered a turkey to be slaughtered for his family’s Thanksgiving meal. However, his young son Tad convinced him to spare the bird’s life because the boy wanted it for a pet.

Stemming from this tale has come the yearly event of choosing which turkey’s life will be spared from being on the menu of the White House Thanksgiving dinner.

Similarly, First lady Grace Coolidge, had ordered a raccoon to be served for the White House Thanksgiving meal. But when a friendly and mild-mannered raccoon was delivered it charmed its way into their hearts, so they kept it as a pet.

The President wore the raccoon draped around his neck, and the first lady cradled it like a kitten in her lap.

Not all of their staff, however, loved the little animal as much as the first family did. Rebecca, as she was eventually named, would claw clothes (especially silk stockings) furniture and draperies, but her adoring owners seemed not to notice or care.
Calvin Coolidge often referred to the female raccoon as a male. During one of his regular press conferences he quipped, “I don’t think he is quite grown yet. He is very playful, very interesting, and seems very well trained and well behaved.”

Many years afterwards, Grace recalled, “She (Rebecca) enjoyed nothing better than being placed in a bathtub with a little water in it and given a cake of soap with which to play. In this fashion she would amuse herself for an hour or more.”

President Coolidge also kept a cow on the White House grounds and insisted on milking her himself.

President Thomas Jefferson had a mocking bird and two grizzly bear cubs, the latter of which were gifts from Capt. Zebulon Pike who wrote that the bears were of “a different species of bear from that found in the East” and that they were considered to be the “most ferocious animals of the continent.”

Jefferson had already heard from explorer/historians Lewis and Clark how fearsome grizzlies were. In a letter to his granddaughter he wrote, “These (bears) are too dangerous and troublesome for me to keep. I shall therefore send them to Peale’s Museum.”

Having once put a live grizzly on display in his museum, Peale was forewarned. The mighty bear had immediately broken its chain, ripped apart its cage and had had to be destroyed.

Peale wrote in a letter to Jefferson that he hoped to see the male and female cubs grow to adulthood and perhaps produce young. However, the two grizzlies also destroyed their cages and had to be killed. They were stuffed, mounted and displayed in Peale’s museum.
The king of Siam gave fifteenth President, James Buchanan, an Elephant herd which Buchanan wisely gave to the zoo.

Some of his friends had also given him a pair of eagles.

Buchanan decided that the raptors were better suited to a more rural setting, and sent them to Wheatland, his home near Lancaster, PA.

Buchanan, a bachelor, reared some of his nephews and nieces and it is said that he had more success with them than he did with his presidency.

James Madison kept a parrot and a herd of sheep while occupying the White House.
**John Quincy Adams** was the first president to have an alligator. It roamed in the unfinished East Room and occupied a bathtub there.

Silkworms were also raised by the president and his family.

When an opossum wandered onto the White House property, **President Herbert Hoover**’s family couldn’t resist keeping it as a pet, and housed it in a special cage in the yard. The first family had numerous domesticated pets, as well.

**President Herbert Hoover**’s son Allan, was given a pair of alligators, which were allowed to roam the White House lawns, but often escaped. This became extremely distressing to the White House personnel, and it was decided that the two animals could live in a special room and bath within the White House.

That arrangement soon proved to be flawed, because the gators often escaped their room and scared everyone who saw them. They were finally donated to the Smithsonian Zoo.

**First Lady Lou Henry Hoover** received the following comment from her secretary, “Beauty and the Beast are not congenial.”

Although **President Theodore Roosevelt** was an expert marksman and killed numerous animals in his day, his children maintained a menagerie of exotic pets.
Bear, zebras, elephant, a lizard, guinea pigs, a pig, a badger, a blue macaw, a hen, a one-legged rooster, a coyote and a hyena, all enjoyed the first family’s devotion and companionship.

**William Henry Harrison** died of pneumonia within a month after coming to the White House, but he had brought his pet goat and cow along from his Ohio home.

**Andrew Johnson’s** white mice roamed freely in the White House, no doubt to the displeasure of the staff. Johnson was totally devoted to the small rodents and even gave them food and water from saucers kept in his bedroom.

Although in more recent years most first families have had horses, dogs or cats in residence, the White House has been spared the exotic animals of its past. If you listen closely you might hear from our nation’s capitol a huge sigh of relief!