

greet

CORONA DEL MAR

The Klebanoff Family

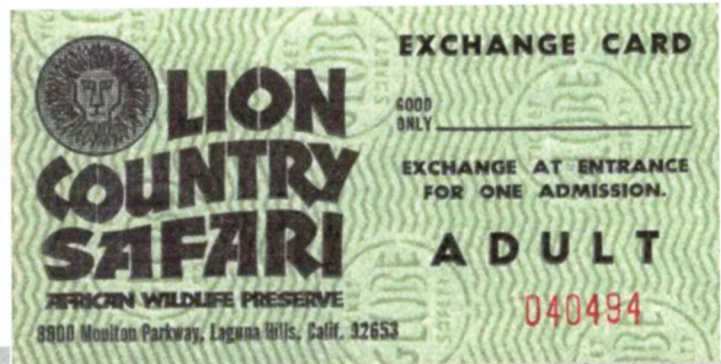
Scooping Up
Sweets and
Paw-some
Treats!

gelato del mar

When Lions Roamed South County

Lion Country Safari Exhibit will evoke memories

BY PETE WEITZNER – EXECUTIVE PRODUCER, "THE GOLDEN AGE OF NEWPORT HARBOR" • PHOTOS COURTESY OF OC ARCHIVES



"Everyone who sees the book cover has a story," **Historian and Prolific Author Chris Epting** said. "Everyone who was here then has a Lion Country Safari story."

Epting has written over 40 books about history and pop culture. The longtime Orange County resident's latest is *Lost Landmarks of Orange County*. It features the iconic **Lion Country Safari** on the cover.

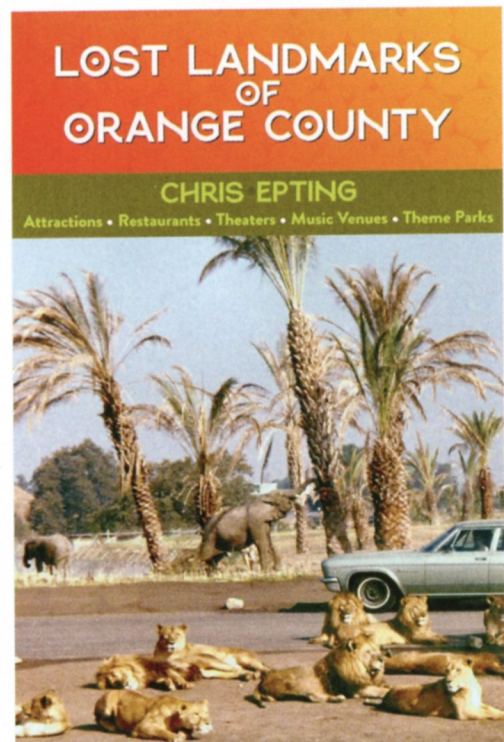
African wildlife roamed the drive-through Irvine Safari from 1970-1984. The lions and giraffes will "roam" the **Balboa Island Museum Newport Beach** this spring as its newest exhibit. Epting will speak about this unique time in Orange County history on April 25.

"I got the idea after seeing the cover of Chris's book," **Museum Executive Director Tiffany Pepys Hoey** said. "It's going to be a popular exhibit."

Lion Country Safari makes no economic sense in today's Orange County. But animal attractions were popular in those days.

"There was **Japanese Village and Deer Park** in Buena Park," Epting said. "There was an alligator park. My first family trip from New York to California, Disneyland and Knott's were on our list, but so was Lion Country Safari. I saw it as a kid, blew my mind. Nothing was developed over there. Endless space."

And there were lions, antelopes, ostriches, cheetahs, rhinoceroses, and elephants all



roaming the grassy acreage off Moulton Parkway. The price was right too. Adults paid \$3.25 to drive through; children five through eleven \$1.50, four and under free.

And the park had a star. His name was Frasier.

"Frasier the Sensuous Lion," Epting said. "There's still a plaque in his honor." Frasier was King of the Lion Country Jungle. Well, King of the Breeding Shed.

The gimpy lion from a Mexican circus arrived in 1971 and sired an amazing 35 cubs, before passing in late 1972 at nearly 20 years of age, 100 in human years.

If the park sounds a little unsafe, that was part of the lure.

"Literally all the animals were just roaming," Epting said, "all comingled, brushing up against your car. Disneyland was great. This was unique. I recall eating popcorn, and out of nowhere a giraffe came and ate our popcorn. There was

an employee on a platform in the middle of it all, but really, what could he do?"

The lions last roared here in November 1984. Five other Lion Country Safaris in the USA closed their gates in the '80s and '90s. But the original in Loxahatchee, Florida remains open. Two years after Lion Country closed, **Wild Rivers Waterpark** opened on part of the safari-camp property. **Irvine Meadows Amphitheatre** opened on the property in 1981.

The Lion Country exhibit will take up residence in the museum's gallery. It replaces the winter resident, "Transforming the Irvine Ranch."

"Fourteen years. It was a pretty good run," Epting said.

Visit Balboa Island Museum Newport Beach. Open daily. Free general admission. Become a member.

balboaislandmuseum.org/become-a-member

Hands Inside! The drive-through park was a little scary. Convertibles were prohibited.



Balboa Island museum NEWPORT BEACH[©]

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