

NEW AT THE ZOO

director Joel Parrott, referring to two popular characters in Disney's "Lion King" movie. But at the zoo, these will be the real thing, not two-dimensional animations.

The concept of an African savanna followed construction of the zoo's "Mahali Pa Tembo," an African elephant exhibit, nearly a decade ago.

"Once the elephants were out here," Parrott said, "it became evident that we needed visitor facilities" for such amenities as food service and restrooms. So, zoo officials came up with the idea of an African village where smaller animals could be housed and where the needed visitor services could be located.

Parrott, who has acted as the general contractor for the project since November, said that the exhibit highlights the unusual diversity of life present in the African savanna, and Oakland's mild climate with its dry summers and wet winters is similar to that of the savanna regions.

"Anybody who has gone on safari to Africa will recognize most of these animals as very typical of the experience," said a coverall-clad Parrott as he took a quick break from overseeing the finishing touches on the new exhibit last week. "We're trying to re-create that experience as much as we can. Our role is to create an environment in which people can get a taste of what it might be like in Africa."

Plant lovers will be impressed at the extensive botanical collection surrounding the exhibits. Among the

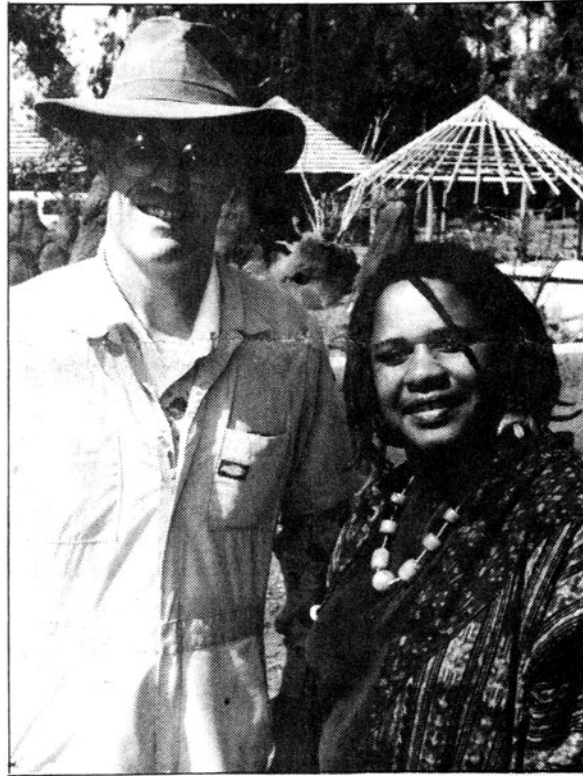
plant specimens are what Parrott believes are the only yellow fever tree in the Bay Area.

Yellow fever trees, common to the river areas of East Africa, were long thought by the people of the region to be the source of yellow fever, Parrott said. While it is really mosquitoes that spread the deadly disease, the trees are typically found in the wettest areas where mosquitoes abound and the name stuck.

And there is the aloe collection that Parrott unabashedly terms, "spectacular." The specimens were selected by zoo representatives who went from nursery to nursery in San Diego County.

Even the artificial rock in the African savanna was designed to simulate granite rock outcropping known as *kopje* found in the southern Serengeti plain. Some of the rocks form the base for a waterfall that runs through the exhibit. Hidden below the rocks are electric and water lines, animal night-houses and zookeeper access.

An outstanding feature of the meerkat exhibit are the artificial termite mounds. Parrott explained that savanna termites eat the roots and trunks of trees, usually acacia trees. When the trees die, they are abandoned by the termites which leave behind large sand mounds that can reach 14 to 16 feet in height and become nesting sites for dwarf mongoose and other species. Not so visible in the meerkat exhibit is a tube through which young human visitors can crawl for a closer view of the burrowing animals.



Jeff Lindquist

Oakland Zoo executive director Joel Parrott and sculptor Amana Johnson in front of the simulated African village in the zoo's latest exhibit, an African savanna.

'We will have Pumbaa and we will have Timon.'

JOEL PARROTT, EXECUTIVE
DIRECTOR OF THE OAKLAND
ZOO AND GENERAL
CONTRACTOR FOR THE
AFRICAN SAVANNA EXHIBIT

Another highlight of the new African savanna is the *manyatta*, or village area, designed by Oakland artist Amana Johnson. The village consists of three round grass-roofed huts. The two enclosed huts, designed in the wattle and daub construction style typical of savanna dwellings known as *nyumbas*, will house a refreshment stand and rotating exhibits.

Parrott is especially pleased that the concrete walls of the huts are textured to resemble cow dung, another traditional building material in the African savanna. "This was not easy to do," he noted. An open-air hut will serve as a shade structure where zoo visitors can sit and enjoy the surroundings. The exhibit hut is earmarked for cultural displays: fabrics, artifacts, art and photographs of the peoples of the African savanna.

In addition, the zoo hopes to make use of the talents of Zulu and South African performance companies based in Oakland.

Although Johnson's primary artistic medium is stone sculpture, she acquired the commission to design East African cultural and artistic elements in the village through the City of Oakland's Public Arts Program.

For the zoo village, Johnson chose to reflect Kikuyu culture in the village, and she worked with a design team that consisted of structural and civil engineers, building and landscape architects, and Dr. Parrott.

"There are a lot of different peoples in the savanna area of Kenya," said Johnson, adding that the Masai are the African people that tend to the most well-known. "We wanted to broaden that

a medicine person and a child, like an initiate or an apprentice," the artist said.

Johnson called the zoo project, her first commission, "a wonderful experience," adding that in the process she has also learned about reading blueprints, grading and setting piers.

The \$2.3 million dollar project was primarily paid for by bond measures. In 1988, voters in Alameda and Contra Costa counties passed Measure AA, which provided the zoo with \$5 million for capital improvements over the following 10 years. Additionally, an annual property tax subsidy was granted to the zoo. Two years later, another \$10 million, to be portioned out over 12 years, was made available under voter-approved Measure K.

Parrott is pleased with the changes at the zoo, a decade ago deemed one of the 10 worst in the nation, and attributes the progress to "tremendous and growing community support."

The zoo has turned its focus to three major themes: animals of the African savanna, animals of the tropical rainforests, and California 1820, a 60-acre exhibit of animals once native to the state — the grizzly bear, bison jaguar, gray wolf and white tail deer — that is slated for construction on a hillside near "Simba Pori," the African lion exhibit.

The zoo is open daily, from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Admission is \$5.50 for adults, \$3 for seniors and children ages 2-14. Call 632-9525 for more information.