26 Years in Cage, Ivan the Gorilla May Go to Zoo:
Pacific Northwest: Activists have spent years picketing store urging transfer to new quarters.

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TACOMA, Wash. — On the wall outside his concrete cage, newspaper clippings chronicle the highlights of Ivan’s youth.

There's a photo of a young Ivan at the wheel of a motor boat. There's Ivan holding a baby, Ivan riding a bike, Ivan on his way to Hollywood in the late 1960s to appear in the "Daktari" TV series.

Those days are long past.

For the last 26 years, Ivan, a lowland gorilla, has whiled away his days in a dark corner of the B&I Shopping Center, one of several exotic animals constituting the vast variety store's circus theme.

When Ivan arrived from the Congo in 1964, life as the store's mascot was a whirlwind.

But over the next few years, he put on a few hundred pounds and changed from a playful, cuddly, wild animal into a playful, deadly, wild animal.

"He was supposedly raised as any other teen-ager by Tacoma standards," said Mitchell Fox, animal issues director for the Progressive Animal Welfare Society, or PAWS, based in Lynnwood. "But his teen-age years went by in a matter of months. He was retired at about 3 years old and he hasn't come out of retirement since."

Ivan is a member of an endangered species. Fewer than 5,000 lowland gorillas are estimated to remain in the wild in their native equatorial Africa. There are about 320 in North American zoos, and about 800 in captivity worldwide.

Animal rights activists have spent years picketing the B&I, urging the store's owner to transfer the 500-pound gorilla to a zoo, where he can roam in a more natural habitat and perhaps touch a fellow gorilla.
"We have every indication that the experts are correct in their assumption that Ivan can be resocialized and live out the rest of his life in a more natural habitat instead of sitting by himself in a concrete cage in a department store," Fox said.

Last year, pop star Michael Jackson offered to build Ivan a "gorilla palace" at his fantasy-land zoo. That deal fell through, in part because of the difficulty in finding a female companion to live with Ivan.

PAWS took up his cause after he was featured a few years ago in a National Geographic special on gorillas in captivity. Recently, it sued B&I under the federal Endangered Species Act, claiming the 29-year-old gorilla is used illegally to promote a commercial venture and should be transferred to a zoo.

Store owner Ron Irwin has resisted moving Ivan since the idea first was proposed a few years ago. He argues that Ivan is like one of the family and couldn't withstand the shock of the transition, but will not comment further.

Housed in a remote corner of the store in a 40-by-40 concrete room with a faux jungle landscape, not far from a check-cashing counter, Ivan seems bored and sullen, angrily resigned to a lifetime of confinement.

Sitting at one of the room's thick windows, he leaned his head on crossed arms and peered with sad, dark eyes at a recent visitor. After a few moments, he averted his gaze and looked despondently at the floor, frowning and furrowing his heavy brow.

A passing animal handler noticed the sulking primate. "What's the matter with you today?" she asked.

Fox believes Ivan's big chance for a new life might come by the end of the summer because of a rift within the Irwin family and business problems.

In November, B&I Realty, which owns the shopping center, filed for Chapter 11 reorganization in bankruptcy court, claiming Ivan as a $30,000 asset.

A judge has granted a request by Irwin's sister, Mary Lou Borgert of Yakima, for an accounting of the family trust that owns much of the B&I stock. In court documents, Borgert accuses her brother and
mother, Constance Irwin, of mismanaging the business to the tune of $1 million in losses. And in a competing reorganization plan filed in bankruptcy court, she has asked that B&I be liquidated and Ivan transferred to a zoo.

"Can you imagine that you are a liquidating trustee and someone tells you you have to deal with a gorilla?" said Sarah Weaver, the Seattle bankruptcy attorney representing Borgert.

It isn’t the first time Ivan has appeared close to leaving his dark cell at the B&I. Zoos in Atlanta and Dallas have offered to adopt him, but Irwin has declined.

Terry Maple, director of Zoo Atlanta and a noted gorilla expert, disagrees with Irwin's contention that the move would be too stressful.

"Gorillas are transferred all the time, and very successfully," Maple said.

Ivan, he said, could prove to be a valuable mating male for any zoo because he appears to have no relatives in the United States and so does not pose an inbreeding threat. Gorillas are known to live into their 50s.

"Sometimes change can be very good," Maple said. "I certainly think that for Ivan, moving from a human family to a gorilla family is the one and only chance he has to be a gorilla."