

Harold J. Coolidge

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In 1927, when the world was not so easily traveled, Harvard University assembled a hunting and biological research team to explore the tropical jungle terrain of West Africa—specifically Liberia and parts of the Congo Basin.

The group set out to collect exotic animal specimens and study parasitic diseases among the native people. The aide-de-camp of the party was a 23-year-old graduate of the university who put a career in international diplomacy on hold to explore his interest in big game hunting and field biology. But the sedate life of the civil servant was quickly abandoned and he never looked back. Decades later, Harold Jefferson Coolidge, an active member of the Boone and Crockett Club, would win considerable fame as

much admired. Like Roosevelt, he suffered through an unhealthy childhood and, to challenge himself, took up hunting. It was an activity that introduced him to the outdoors and eventually to the backcountry in 1925 when he took part in an ambitious excursion to Alaska. He was then just 21, and was commissioned by the Biological Survey in Washington to bring back an Alaska brown bear for study.

This experience must surely have been an eye opener for the East Coast student of genteel upbringing. Hal bunked in a one-room shed on the windy and isolated Admiralty Island. The accommodations were provided by Alan Haselborg, a full bearded, eccentric but skilled hunter-trapper, who was famous for his hermit-like tendencies. The two evidently got along well and Hal mimicked the old timer's tracking habits to hone his own hunting skills.

As for the requested bear, Coolidge did indeed return with his specimen. With this early success, as well as a restless ambition, a flair for adventure, and a family connection or two, the young graduate found himself assigned as assistant zoologist on the 1927 Harvard expedition. Coolidge's permission to join

the trip was based largely on his ability to fund his own passage, as there were no government grants offered to scientific expeditions at the time.

Coolidge's eagerness to clamber up ridges, ford rushing streams, and hack through thickets was not typical of men of his age and social stature; his peers were far more likely to bask idly in their easy prosperity. Europe was the sum-

mer destination of choice for most wealthy vacationers; adventure travel was nearly a century away from being a popular pastime, particularly when it involved unknown and potentially dangerous locales. Coolidge's drive to get out, see the world, and participate in scientific voyages to any number of unconventional destinations both distinguished him from the norm and served the cause of conservation well.

AFRICA

Coolidge and seven scientists comprised the Harvard Medical Expedition. On July 2, 1927, they reached the African coast and began what Coolidge described as "the adventure of a lifetime."

To most Americans in the 1920s, Africa was a continent shrouded in legend and mystery, a fabulous expanse of desert, impenetrable jungle, sweeping grassland, and distant mountain ranges. The images associated with the Dark Continent—Tarzan, Kilimanjaro, and the Congo—were far removed from Coolidge's roots on the North Shore of Boston. Three months after arriving in Africa, he wrote in his diary, "After supper it was great to sit under a beautiful tropical moon with the enormous black shadows of trees on our side and the twinkling or glow of small fires surrounded by squatting natives on the other. The stillness was only disturbed by the occasional beating of the tom-tom in the distance. The very stars seemed to fade in the brilliance of the moonlight. I just sat and thought, '...what a different world.'"

Coolidge was awed with Africa, particularly when in the deeper reaches of the Congo Basin, with its dense and varied vegetation, swollen rivers, torrential rains, intense sun, and incessant sounds of insects, birds and monkeys in the forest canopy. These



a forceful and responsible voice on behalf of wildlife and habitat conservation.

Hal Coolidge (no relation to Calvin Coolidge, who was President at the time) could empathize with the life experiences of another American President, Theodore Roosevelt, whom he

impressions resonated with the young Coolidge and provided the basis for a deep respect for the diversity of nature.

Coolidge initially took to his role as team hunter with relish, sometimes spending entire days tracking one animal. His enthusiasm waned, however, when he discovered that the skills he had acquired in Alaska were not as useful in Africa. The leader of the expedition, Dr. Richard Strong, eventually decided to commission several native hunters to collect specimens because they were more versed in local hunting techniques. Still, by the end of the expedition, Coolidge was able to account for buffalo, zebra, antelope, elephant, and his prized kill, a mountain gorilla. The six-foot tall, silverback male had, according to entries in Coolidge's diary, a nasty and aggressive reputation among local tribesmen and they cheered the beast's end. Today, the mounted specimen is still displayed at the Harvard Museum of Natural History.

In addition to his skill with a rifle, Hal Coolidge distinguished himself with his organizational capabilities. He was adept at handling the near impossible logistics of moving an expedition, on foot, through hundreds of miles of trackless backcountry, with the aid of native porters. It is unclear whether or not these porters were paid. Most of them had never dealt with money as currency before. The group had little difficulty procuring several porters for each man, a curious thing considering there was little to no incentive for these native men and women to lug heavy baggage, day after day, through the forests for a crew of strangely dressed foreigners.

Coolidge himself demonstrated a solid work ethic, perse-



TOP: A portrait of a hunter - Harold J. Coolidge.

CENTER: Coolidge organized native porters to help transport the gear for the expedition.

BOTTOM: Coolidge with Pygmy natives.

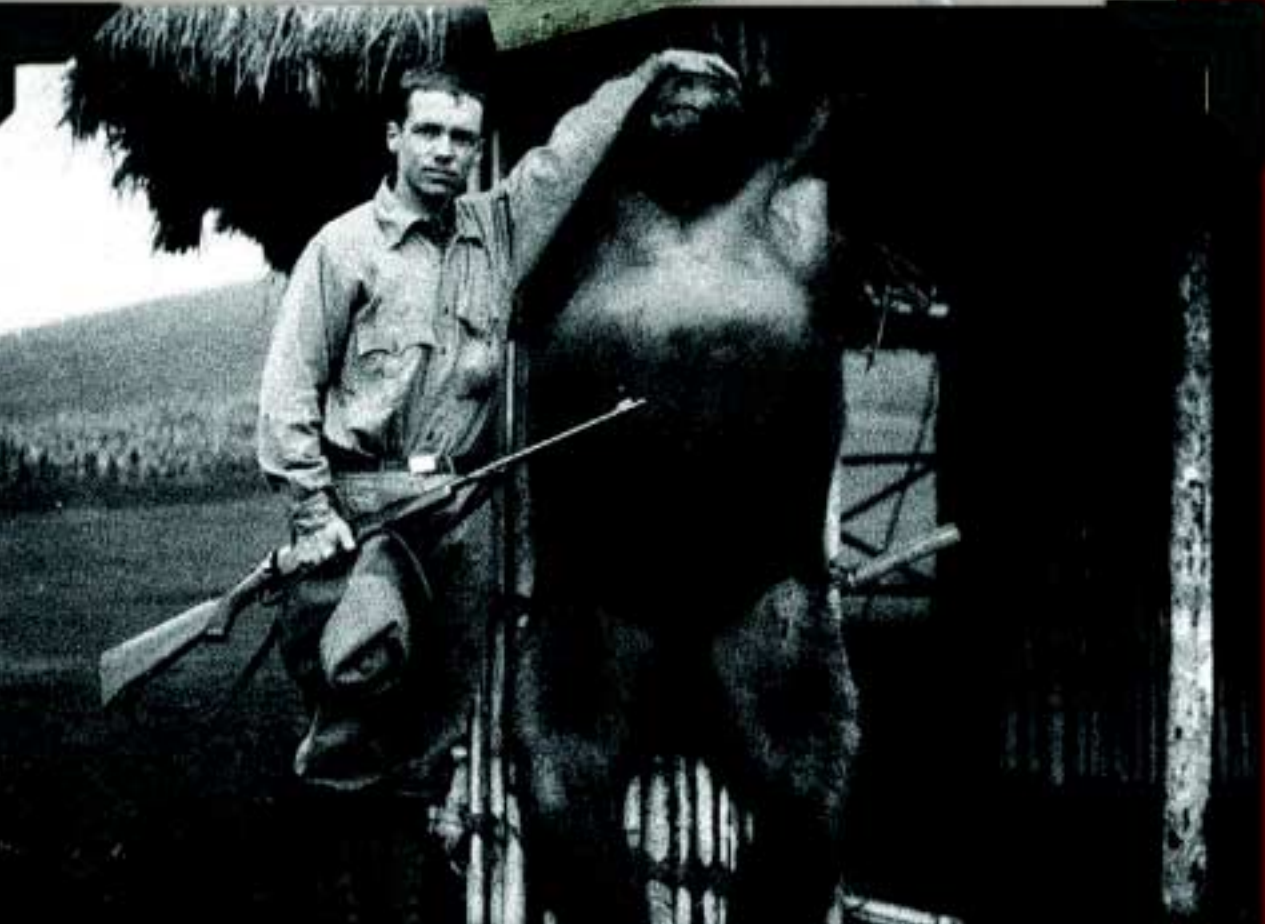


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TOP: A portrait of two men taken on one of Coolidge's two Asian expeditions.

CENTER: Coolidge with the six-foot tall, silverback male gorilla. The mounted specimen is still displayed at the Harvard Museum of Natural History.

BOTTOM: Villagers with a large snake.



THE COOLIDGE CHRONICLES

After years of restoration, the African film footage, supplemented by intensive research into Coolidge's life, has been woven into an hour long documentary by Interlock Media of Cambridge, Massachusetts. The film, titled "The Coolidge Chronicles," delves into the issues raised by Coolidge's journeys, including colonialism,

racism, and conservation, and places these topics in a contemporary context with footage from a scientific expedition to Africa in January of 2001. It also provides a fascinating look back into the history of science. "The Coolidge Chronicles," which is in need of further funding in order to meet a 2002 completion deadline, is sponsored by such donors as Eastman Kodak, the Rockefeller Foundation, the Greenstone Foundation, and the Margot Marsh Fund. The Coolidge Chronicles will be screened at the meeting of the Boone and Crockett Club in White Plains, New York, on December 1, 2001, in association with the Camp Fire Club of America. For more information on the film, please visit www.interlockmedia.com

vering through frequent periods of exhaustion in an overheated environment as he conducted careful and detailed field studies. He also captured much of the expedition's work on film, returning remarkably well-shot footage despite the difficult conditions and the early stage of the technology.

Coolidge's African journey undoubtedly sparked his interest in primate studies and although he was never a Ph.D. level scientist, he was responsible for some remarkably thorough published works on the gorilla and the pygmy chimpanzee, or bonobo. Following through on his ambitions in this field took additional strength of character given the times. In 1925, two years before the Harvard Expedition, a science teacher named John Scopes had been tried and convicted in a Tennessee courthouse of violating state law by teaching Darwin's theories of evolution. The Scopes trial brought to light some very contentious issues and passionate debates spanning politics, science, sociology, and religion. The fact that Coolidge seemed to remain unaffected by this phenomenon is a testament to his firm belief in the scientific method and an unwavering devotion to his work.

Hardly the timid or retiring personality, Coolidge described the two subsequent expeditions he would lead into Borneo and Indochina to study gibbons and orangutans as opportunities to gain insight into "evolutionary primate heritage" and the "taxonomy of our closest relatives." To Coolidge, the issue of man's fundamental origins had been resolved and it was time to advance humanity's understanding of our place in nature.

THE ASIAN EXPEDITIONS

During the two Asian expeditions he led, the 1929 Kelley-Roosevelt expedition to Indochina on behalf of the Chicago Museum of Science and the 1937 Asiatic Primate Expedition (APE), Coolidge began to modify the standard methods of field biology. The earlier Asian trip included a 1,000-mile, raft journey down the Mekong River during which the party collected some

5,000 specimens. This could be regarded as one of the final colonial era scientific expeditions with the heavy emphasis on collecting that characterized scientific forays of the times.

In contrast, the APE undertaken in 1937 ushered in a new era with far less focus on collecting and more on field observation. Coolidge recognized the need for a restructured formula for scientific investigation: after the first several hundred specimens are measured, weighed, dissected, and described, there is not a great deal more information to be gleaned from the next dead animal lying on the table. At such point a researcher might seek other outlets from which to broaden his study of the species. By the end of the APE, Coolidge and his associates had become fascinated with the noises of the gibbons, and spent more time recording sounds and tracking patterns than hunting and dissecting.

While simple observation might in earlier times have been considered a lax approach to science, Coolidge slowly recognized the virtues of primate watching for the insight it could provide into behavioral science. Collecting specimens as a field method no longer carried much scientific weight, and the increasing importance attached to the preservation of species began to expose the detrimental effects of unlimited, big game hunting. This one man's personal progression from a young, big game hunter to a mature and thoughtful conservationist paralleled a professional transition from apparently endless specimen collecting to a form of field work that paved the way for the groundbreaking studies of Diane Fosse and Jane Goodall.

WILDLIFE CONSERVATION MOVEMENT

During Coolidge's time, the study of ecology, with its complex interrelationships of species, migratory patterns, and habitats, was not fully developed. The early ecologists within the scientific community had not yet collected the hard data by which science lives.

It was not until after the APE that Coolidge began to seriously

contemplate the repercussions of unrestrained hunting on wildlife populations. As an "enlightened" hunter, he was instrumental in bridging the scientific and hunting communities and was able to bring the arguments on behalf of conservation to a coherent whole.

He knew from experience that animal populations would not withstand increased hunting pressure. As a man who also recognized the dynamics of the natural world, he understood that those same populations would not tolerate continued loss of habitat. Coolidge, along with others such as Aldo Leopold, began preaching a novel sermon, challenging their contemporaries to look and think seriously about the dire consequences of habitat loss and species disappearance on a spiritual as well as scientific basis. His own lifetime devotion to the cause of conservation was built on a foundation of experience, prestige, and scientific authority.

Scientists are often constrained from involvement in policy and decision making. Coolidge would have none of this. Upon recognizing the need for a conservation movement, he showed no hesitation in speaking his mind at a time when habitat conservation was considered in many quarters a radical and unnecessary impediment to progress. He applied his considerable energy and efforts to helping found the World Wildlife Fund and the International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources, two very well-established conservation institutions.

When Harold Coolidge won the J. Paul Getty Wildlife Conservation Prize, the first American to be so honored, it was a fitting recognition of the unique legacy of tireless conservation work on the part of a man who would clearly leave the world a better and more livable place. ▲▲▲

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