

CARL E. AKELEY – Taxidermist, Sculptor, Conservation Visionary

CARL AKELEY WAS RIDDLED BY fever and exhaustion when he died in the Belgian Congo in 1926, and he lies buried there on a mountain hillside. His influence was largely responsible for the founding of the first of Africa's national parks, the Albert National Park in Kivu Province in the eastern Congo. Akeley was dedicated to the protection of the mountain gorilla, which had its last stronghold in that area.

Akeley's interest in taxidermy began at an early age in upstate New York where he was born in 1864. When he was 12 years old he constructed his first habitat group of birds. In 1884 he gained employment at Ward's National Science Establishment in Rochester, New York, then the headquarters of taxidermy in America. He pioneered the concept that a museum exhibit should convey to the observer its natural character, habits and environment, and he followed this concept in his next job as an assistant at the Milwaukee Museum.

Akeley perfected his taxidermy skills at the Field Museum in Chicago, and later in his connection with the American Museum of Natural History in New York. His several trips to Africa to secure museum specimens exposed him to malaria, dysentery, blackwater fever, and numerous close calls with dangerous big

game animals. A bull elephant caught him between its tusks, tore the skin off the side of his face and attempted to crush him into the ground. Its tusks struck a root or a rock, and distracted, the elephant took off after the porters. Another close call found Akeley charged by a wounded leopard that he managed to strangle with his bare hands!

Carl Akeley's skill as a sculptor equaled that of his expertise in taxidermy. Additionally, he excelled as an inventor. The Akeley cement gun, developed for use in taxidermy, was used in construction work as well. The Akeley camera that he developed was used by many prominent wildlife photographers. During World War I, he was attached to the engineering corps of the U.S. Army as a specialist on mechanical devices and optical equipment. It is seldom that a person attains eminence in so many fields, and he received many awards for his accomplishments.

Twice married, his first wife, Delia, accompanied him on his expeditions to Africa. After a divorce in 1923, he married Mary Jobe, and she was with him when he died in the Congo on his last expedition. Both women wrote books that relate to Akeley and his African heritage.

Akeley was a mentor to James L. Clark, teaching Clark his newly

developed taxidermy methods. Both Akeley and Clark, as well as several other prominent members of the staff at the American Museum of Natural History, were members of the Boone and Crockett Club.

One of Carl Akeley's dreams was creation of the African Hall at the museum, and he devoted a tremendous effort to raising funds for its creation and securing the animal mounts it would display in its many dioramas. The center feature, a massive elephant group, was completed by James L. Clark after Akeley's death. The Field Museum in Chicago also named its African wing the Akeley Memorial Hall.

In 1991 John Heminway, chairman of the African Wildlife Federation, wrote "What is so remarkable about Carl Akeley's contribution is that it never fails anyone. Here I am today, with three-quarters of my life spent pondering Africa, and my heart still races with his gorillas . . . I believe his achievement was his fidelity to nature . . . I'm convinced that what Carl Akeley intended—a vision of Africa as if you had discovered it yourself—still works!" ▲▲▲



Theodore J. Holsten, Jr.
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**BOOK BY
CARL AKELEY**

In Brightest Africa (1923)

**BOOKS BY
CARL AND MARY L. AKELEY**

Adventures in the African Jungle (1930)
Lions, Gorillas and Their Neighbors (1932)

**BOOKS BY
MARY L. JOBE AKELEY**

Carl Akeley's Africa (1929)
Restless Jungle (1936)
The Wilderness Lives Again (1940)
Rumble of a Distant Drum (1946)
Congo Eden (1950)

**BOOKS BY
DELIA AKELEY**

J. T. Jr., *The Biography of an African Monkey* (1928)
Jungle Portraits (1930)

Images from Carl Akeley's *In Brightest Africa* published in 1923.

Akeley and a dead lioness

Akeley's motion picture camera

ABOVE: The Old Man of Mikeno – Bronze bust of mountain gorilla
RIGHT: Akeley with the leopard he killed bare-handed.