

B&C CONSER

PROFILE: Carl E. Akeley (1864-1926)

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Although the original intent of the Boone and Crockett Club was “to work for the preservation of the wild animal life of this country,” members have not confined themselves to America. Carl Akeley was an African adventurer, explorer, and conservationist who twice nearly lost his life battling African game.

Clarence Ethan (Carl) Akeley was born in upstate New York on May 19, 1864. Three brothers followed, and all died before their first birthday. His anguished mother ignored young Carl and he became solitary and introspective. He worked on the family farm, hunted, avoided school, and became intrigued with bird taxidermy.

At age 19, Carl went to work for Ward’s Natural Science Establishment in Cleveland. Ward’s was and still is a leading international supplier of mounted and skeletal specimens to museums, medical schools and science departments. Mounted skins were sewn and stuffed with straw, rags, or excelsior. Carl experimented with plaster casts and other methods. When P. T. Barnum’s famous parade elephant, Jumbo, died after colliding with a locomotive, Akeley successfully mounted the skin and separately displayed the articulated skeleton.

Milwaukee

During Akeley’s youth, there was widespread concern that the unlimited slaughter of game would cause the extinction of the world’s large animals. Zoos and natural history museums were established to preserve both living and mounted examples. In 1886, Carl was recruited to Milwaukee, then a vibrant shipping and industrial city. There, from his private studio, he sold mounts privately and supplied the Milwaukee Public Museum. Carl hunted northern Wisconsin for fur-bearing animals and created a muskrat scene showing boggy earth, partially dead vegetation, and five rats in different activities above and below the water’s surface. The scene emphasized the interrelation of animals to their environment, a new concept in museum displays that was subsequently known as the “Milwaukee Style.”

In 1892, Carl hired a young lady as his assistant. Mickie Reiss had run away from

CARL AKELEY AND HIS WIFE IN 1925 AS THEY PREPARE TO LEAVE FOR HIS LAST TRIP TO AFRICA TO SECURE MORE SPECIMENS FOR THE MUSEUM.

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AVATIONISTS

home at age 13, married at 14, divorced at 18, and at 19 became Carl's assistant, lover, and eventual wife.

That same year, the Smithsonian Institute commissioned Carl to create a diorama of Indian warriors on mustangs for Chicago's 1893 Columbian Exhibition. Carl's depiction of the horses was highly acclaimed. By first making a clay model, then a mold of plaster, and from this a paper-mache form (fiberglass today), he converted taxidermy to art and sculpture.

Africa I

Carl moved to Chicago in 1895 to work at the Field Museum of Natural History, founded just two years earlier. The following year, the museum sent Carl and two other men on a collecting expedition to Africa. The group sailed to present-day Somalia.

The three explorers initially were on their own. At one point, severely dehydrated, they obtained goat milk at gunpoint from a passing caravan. Finally, the "headman" arrived with the rest of the porters. Carl wounded a lioness at close range, but it uncharacteristically fled rather than charged.

His luck didn't hold out, however, with a wounded leopard. Carl caught the charging animal with his right hand and began to choke it with his left. Kneeling on its chest and forelegs, Akeley thrust his right hand deeper into its throat every time the animal took a breath until it suffocated. Carl's injuries, along with a severe malarial infection in another group member, ended the trip. The six-month expedition produced over 200 mammal and 300 bird skins.

Back at the Field Museum, Akeley concentrated on finishing the African mammal mounts. He hunted for three months in Washington's Olympic Range in 1898, collecting over 300 mammal specimens, including five elk. He also completed "The Four Seasons," a display depicting four deer groups, each group within its own diorama, and each diorama occurring in a different season.

Africa II

Akeley and Mickie were married at the end of 1902. In 1905, the Field Museum again sent Carl to Africa to collect the large mammals, specifically elephants. Mickie accompanied him.

From the port of Mombasa in British East Africa (present Kenya), the two took the Uganda railroad as far as the primitive town

of Nairobi. They hunted for four months within 50 miles of the town and then spent over a month crating the specimens. After waiting for a native uprising to quell, they hired R. J. Cuninghame as their professional hunter and headed west to the slopes of Mt. Kenya. Carl quickly killed his allotment of two small elephants, and it fell to Mickie to take two elephants large enough for the museum. The staff took six days to pare down a single elephant's one-ton skin. Another two months were spent hunting buffalo. Over 175 porters carried the gear and specimens back to Nairobi, and ultimately 84 packages weighing 17 tons were shipped to Chicago. The couple returned to the Field Museum after a year-and-a-half's absence. Two years later the elephant group, "The Fighting Bulls," was completed and celebrated as far superior to all other efforts at the time.

Akeley invented a spray mechanism to create artificial rocks. His design evolved into the cement gun, and variations of it were used to line the sides of the Panama Canal and trenches during the first World War. A modern version is still used to line swimming pools.

After viewing the "Four Seasons," President Theodore Roosevelt hosted Akeley at a White House dinner and invited him on his 1909 African safari. However, the American Museum of Natural History (AMNH) in New York had already recruited Carl to lead his own African safari to obtain an elephant family group. Roosevelt used Akeley's former outfitter, Cuninghame, as his professional hunter. The Roosevelt safari included TR, his son Kermit, and the AMNH taxidermist and sculptor, James Clark, all Boone and Crockett Club Members.

Africa III

Mickie and Carl left Nairobi in September of 1909. Carl tried numerous ways to induce rhinoceros to charge, but was frustrated getting his movie camera to work. Later on in the safari, he hired 100 Nandi warriors to stage a lion hunt. Over three weeks, they killed 14 lions and 5 leopards. The action was fast and furious, but Carl never achieved adequate film footage. An aggravated Akeley vowed to invent a better camera. The Roosevelt and Akeley safaris rendezvoused and hunted for three days together.

Carl twice almost lost his life on this trip. He contracted malaria, and relapsed once

AKELEY WITH A KUDU TAKEN ON ONE OF HIS MANY AFRICAN SAFARIS.

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BELOW: ELEPHANT DIORAMA CREATED BY AKELEY FOR THE AMERICAN MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY.



so severely he was brought back to recuperate in a Nairobi hospital. On another occasion, a large bull elephant charged from behind, and either the safety was jammed or Carl's cold fingers couldn't move it. Carl cast aside the gun, grabbed one tusk and swung himself between the great beast's tusks. The bull plowed his tusks into the ground and swung his trunk wildly, trying to crush and knock

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Akeley off. When Akeley finally collapsed, the bull, thinking the job complete, left and uncharacteristically did not return. Akeley had a torn and broken face, fractured ribs, and a collapsed lung. His porters thought him dead. It took over three months to recover.

Carl finally obtained two bulls large enough for the museum. The first was wound-



CARL AKELEY WITH HIS CAMERA PREPARING FOR ANOTHER SAFARI.

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LOWLAND GORILLA DIORAMA CREATED BY AKELEY.



ed and charged twice before succumbing to a brain shot. The other bull took several shots to the heart, and Akeley watched as a half dozen cows tried to lift the dying animal to its feet with their trunks. This action impressed Akeley and led to his famous sculpture, "Wounded Comrade." No longer did he consider elephants just brutish animals; they showed intelligence and social awareness.

American Museum of Natural History

The safari lasted two years, and the rehabilitation periods gave Akeley time to ponder. Instead of just an "Elephant Hall," he now envisioned an "African Hall" with multiple animal groupings and diorama. Henry Fairfield

Osborn, president of the museum and a Boone and Crockett Member, had sponsored Akeley into the Boone and Crockett Club. Osborn sold the African Hall concept to the museum trustees. Carl hired James Clark as his assistant and went to work on the elephants. During this period, Akeley also developed into a successful sculptor of African wildlife.

Akeley invented a motion picture camera that was half the weight of the one he had previously used, could pan and tilt easily, was water resistant, and virtually indestructible. The camera was used for aerial reconnaissance during the First World War, by newsreel photographers, and by Hollywood to film the first King Kong movie. Carl designed a large coastal searchlight constructed of reflective materials electronically deposited onto plaster that would not shatter when hit by a bullet. The army asked him to design a larger, more mobile tank. Meanwhile, his relationship with Mickie deteriorated; they separated and later divorced.

Africa IV - Gorillas

The lowland gorilla was first seen by Caucasians in 1855, and the mountain gorilla not until 1902. No museum had a gorilla group. Akeley was determined to create one, as well as to study and photograph the great apes. This 1921 expedition began in Capetown and progressed north by train, river steamer, and finally on foot to Rwanda. With several select porters, Akeley struggled up the steep, tangled side of Mt. Mikeno, and on a cliff shot a large male gorilla. The porters hung on to both the gorilla and Akeley as he skinned the "Old Man of Mikeno" with a pocketknife.

The next day he killed a large female that tumbled down past him, only to be followed by three smaller gorillas trying to keep up with her. One was her four-year-old son whom the porters found terrified in a clearing. When a porter speared it, Akeley saw the emotions of terror, pain, and "piteous pleading" in the dying youngster's face. The next day he took photographs of a mother and two offspring playing, and later killed a female with a baby. Another gorilla grabbed and carried the baby to safety.

Akeley underwent a conversion. He realized that he, the human, was the aggressor and the savage. In the ferociousness and gentility of the gorilla, he saw a mirror of himself. The safari lasted only six months. Akeley was now determined to establish a mountain gorilla sanctuary. This great apes' home is where the Congo, Rwanda-Burundi,

and Uganda meet. Akeley contacted and visited Belgium's King Albert, who in 1919 had toured and admired America's national parks. The king immediately favored a similar park in the Belgian Congo. Initially called the Parc National Albert in 1925, it has been enlarged several times, and now four adjacent national parks encompass 500,000 acres within the three neighboring countries.

Akeley detested writing and hired a personal stenographer to whom he dictated his best-selling books. On October 18, 1924, he married Mary Jobe, who herself was a noted explorer. She had made a series of trips to northern British Columbia studying the region's ecology and Athabascan anthropology.

Africa V

By 1925, the concept of the African Hall began to materialize. George Eastman, the multimillionaire founder of the Eastman Kodak Company and also a Boone and Crockett Member, offered to pay the cost of several exhibits and to finance Akeley's next expedition. Carl assembled a team of museum artists and craftsmen and, along with Eastman and Mary, headed to Africa for the final time.

Akeley, now 61 years old, never completely recovered from a shipboard illness, drove himself too hard, and was hospitalized in Nairobi with a "nervous breakdown." Feeling better after five weeks, Carl and Mary, with several team members, left for the Congo. Akeley was anxious to continue his gorilla studies. Although his illness returned, he struggled on. One day he collapsed. The team rested for a few days and continued. Despite fever, dizziness, loss of appetite, and violent, bloody diarrhea, Akeley was determined to reach the gorilla's home. He finally arrived at Mt. Mikeno, the place of his transformation, but died there on November 17, 1926, and was buried on the mountain's slope.

The Akeley Hall of African Mammals opened 10 years later with 28 diorama. The gorilla group alone had 17,000 leaves, each individually hand-made. The hall is a majestic monument to the vision of Carl Akeley, but the home of the majestic mountain gorilla is truly his living legacy. He was a unique man, easily irritated, hard-driven, courageous, extremely talented, and an inventing genius.

In a larger sense, Akeley's personal abrupt transformation from gorilla killer to gorilla savior reflects in a microcosm the gradual transformation of the American hunter from usurper to protector of our nation's wildlife. ■