CARL AKELEY

Africa's Collector, Africa's Savior

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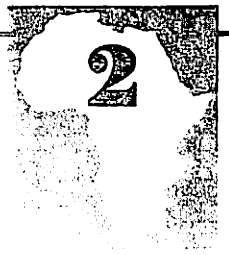
and felt strongly that Carl had already outgrown the demands of his small shop and that he should move on to where he could develop his skills more completely and broaden his vision. David Bruce generously understood that his student exceeded his own talent, and encouraged him to separate and find a fuller life for himself.

Bruce encouraged Akeley to go to Ward's Natural Science Establishment in Rochester. Ward's was a taxidermy studio-factory that turned out mounted specimens for museums all over the country. It was the most famous studio of its kind. If Akeley found the notion of fulfillment in Bruce's shop terrifying, he must have been genuinely stunned at David Bruce's suggestion that he move into the world of taxidermy as a bona fide professional. Buoyed by Bruce's belief in him, and encouraged by his father, Akeley's terror galvanized him to meet his new life head on.

Young Carl Akeley rose before dawn after a sleepless night. He might well have watched Orion in the night sky through his window—Orion, the famous hunter blinded by an angry parent, exposing his empty eye sockets to the rising sun to recover his sight. He shaved with water warmed in the dark kitchen and dressed in his finest clothing. His parents and brothers saw him off for the last time. With a heart filled with anticipation and hope, he set out for Rochester, twenty miles away, and Mr. Ward's Natural Science Establishment.



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WARD'S NATURAL SCIENCE ESTABLISHMENT

Viam inveniam, aut faciam.
(I will either find or make a way.)
—Motto of Ward's Natural Science Establishment

AS CARL WALKED from the train station toward Ward's, located on the perimeter of the University of Rochester campus, his satchel grew heavier. He chose a labyrinthine route, hoping that his footsteps would feed his fast-draining courage and warm his cold hands. He plodded on for quite a while, finally stopping before the huge sperm whale jaws suspended above the entrance gate to Ward's Natural Science Establishment. The gaping jaws both repelled and seduced visitors at the gate. "This is not a museum but a working establishment, where all are very busy," read a sign hanging from the mouth. No welcome mat here.

After a time, Carl passed under the toothy mouth and made his way along the path past a gruesome stuffed gorilla clinging to a tree branch. He ignored the dead primate and made his way to Professor Henry Ward's house and rang the bell. He was admitted and escorted into a room reminiscent of the beautifully appointed rooms he'd seen in the homes of his mother's relatives. But he found no consolation in his memories. He was scared. The door seemed to explode open, and in walked a "very busy, very brusque, and very fierce man." Akeley later wrote that "not even when a leopard sprang on me in Africa have I had a worse moment than when this little man snapped

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out, 'What do you want?' The last vestige of my pride and assurance was centered on my business card, and without a word I handed him this evidence of my skill and art as a taxidermist."[1]

Akeley's strong sense of bravura paid off, and Ward offered him a salary of $3.50 per week. The least expensive boarding house that he could find, however, charged $4.00 per week, so Carl shared a room with his cousin, Willis Matson, who may have helped him out by picking up the financial slack.

When Akeley arrived at Ward's in 1883, the Establishment was the cradle of taxidermy in the United States. A circular advertising Ward's described the institution:

> To the small boy this is a benevolent institution, where cats, turtles, birds' eggs, snakes, and other 'vermin' can be converted into cash. To the naturalist we are a place of terrible temptation, where rare and beautiful specimens of all kinds unite to awaking covetous cravings. To the optician and jeweler we are simply dealers in rough diamonds, gems and the like. The great furriers know us solely as artistic taxidermists, to whom the costliest skins can be entrusted for manufacture into rugs and ornaments. With curators of museums we are builders of systematic collections, perfect in their range and scope; the Egyptologist looks to us for his mummies and coffins, his inscriptions and scarabs; the ethnologist finds here his skulls and weapons, idols and clothing of wild and vanished races; the geologist an assortment of rocks, ores, minerals, crystals, models, relief maps and charts unapproached in America; and the zoologist a more comprehensive group of the animal kingdom than ever Noah shipped, unless that navigator was armed with a compound microscope, a deep-sea dredge, an Arctic sledge and an elephant rifle.

Henry Ward was a renowned collector and traveler, who in 1862 gave his peerless geologic collection to the University of Rochester, and was made professor of geology in the institution. He was not fitted for academia, preferring to vent his passion for travel and collecting. He founded the Establishment while still teaching at the University, building it on the campus, and using the revenue to underwrite his travel/collecting expeditions. Ward felt that American teachers would benefit from having fossil reproductions to illustrate their lectures. He traveled worldwide to find some of the most important specimens, and reproduced them in plaster.

In addition to exploring the museums of sophisticated European cities, Ward had traveled to more remote corners of the earth, including West Africa's Niger River in 1859, when he was twenty-five years old. Gripped with blackwater fever, a type of malaria characterized by passing dark-colored urine, he was put ashore and deserted by the frightened and superstitious river boat crew. As the story goes, a woman rescued and nursed him with marriage in mind. Ward slipped from her grip and somehow, miraculously, made it back to Rochester. Feeling tender and grateful, Ward sent a crate of gifts, to be left by a passing ship, to his generous savior. His exploits were such that at a party in London, David Livingstone himself singled out the professor from more distinguished guests to discuss their African adventures.

As he worked at his new job, Akeley heard the tales of Ward's adventures that buzzed through the shops like a flute harmonic—excited, real but unpalpable. The professor's return from an expedition was eagerly anticipated. He brought back treasures, including skins and bones of exotic creatures with textures, colors, patterns, and forms that Akeley had never even imagined. These experiences gave him his first glimpse of the animals that would become central to his later life.

The Establishment was unique in the history of American science. It not only supplied specimens to scientific societies, hospitals, and museums, but also provided scholarly information and data on the specimens. While an offspring of the institution's work was educational, its primary purpose was strictly commercial.

As noted in the circular, taxidermy was but one of the aspects of Ward's Natural Science Establishment, but it was the most famous. The growing popularity of taxidermy in the late 1880s was a result of a collecting frenzy for natural objects for collector's cabinets—a want for curios that swept the western industrial nations after the publication of Darwin's *Origin of the Species*. During this period, people began examining nature from a different point of view, in terms natural selection and evolution. While the scientific community grappled with, argued about, and probed the Darwinian concepts, "nature" became the rage with the general public. But it was nature arrested in time: animals in alcohol bottles, in drawers, or stuffed and mounted under glass bell jars or in ornamental cases. These treasures appointed the parlors and studies of the enlightened and sensitive. The specimens were still beautiful, but lifeless—reduced to conversation pieces.

From "crystal palaces" to liquor store windows, mounted creatures gazed at humans looking at them. Taxidermy was a booming business. At Ward's one could buy anything from a pig embryo, a giant armadillo, a lyre bird skin, or a fossil to a gorilla or bull giraffe. The demand was great. Little attention was paid to quality output, even though Ward's was producing the best work around.

The profession as a whole was relatively young, less than a century old. (There was one mount, a rhinoceros, at the Royal Museum of Vertebrates in Florence, Italy dating to 1600, but no record exists of how it was mounted.) Already some thoughtful practitioners were trying to redefine it. At Ward's there was a Society of American Taxidermists, a group of young employees who wanted to work toward more artistic appeal. Specifically, they wanted to elevate the quality of museum exhibits. Ward's, however, was not an art

rhino and elephant populations. Extinction hangs over the rhino in particular, like Damocles' sword. This issue will be discussed in the treatment of Akeley's next African expedition.)

The expedition broke camp at Voi and returned to Nairobi to pack the specimens for shipment to Chicago. Vernon Shaw-Kennedy decided to continue hunting in Uganda. Heller had to return to the States, leaving Akeley and Mickie to do most of the packing. They had ordered barrels from England, which proved to be terrible packing containers. Akeley and Mickie had to adapt railway oil drums to secure and ship the specimens. It was painstaking, tedious work, and took five full weeks to accomplish.

During these days in Nairobi, the Akeleys received instructions from the Field Museum to prolong their African sojourn until they succeeded in collecting more buffalos. They secured the necessary permission to hunt buffalos in the Tana River area. However, they were restricted to a specific time in July, which meant they had some time to kill. Akeley and Mickie decided to collect accessories for the groups and began to retrace their steps, leaving for the Athi plains, then moving on to Kijabe at a more relaxed pace. The Akeleys moved on to Lake Naivasha, where they requested permission to make a collection of birds as well as accessories. They were shocked to receive news that their request was denied.

Bibi and Bwana were stuck. Time and money were running out. It was already the middle of July and they were still not allowed to proceed to the Trans-Tana region because of native uprisings. The British government had its hands full with angry indigenous Africans who were not pleased to have their land taken from them and to be told what to do. As these upheavals impacted on Akeley's movements, it is worthwhile to take a closer look at them.

Three main tribal groups, in different parts of the country, were causing the most trouble. Two of these groups were warlike nomadic pastoralists: the Maasai in the plains south of Nairobi and in the Great Rift Valley, and the Nandi in the west above the valley along the Elgeyo Escarpment and the Uasin Gishu Plateau. The third tribe was the Kikuyu, an agricultural people who lived in the central highlands and on Mt. Kenya. None of these people got along with one another.

The Nandi, a Kalenjin-speaking tribe, succeeded in causing the British the most heartache, their revolt surviving the government's attempts to suppress them from 1890 to 1906. The saga of their guerrilla campaign and resistance is fascinating, and was well known to Akeley. He was especially taken with the Nandi, and immortalized their valor and courage in one of his sculptures. The word "Nandi" comes from the Kiswahili "*mnandi*," the name for a cormorant known for its greedy and rapacious fishing habits. The Nandi were so-named by the Arabs who traveled in caravans raided by the Kalenjin-speaking people as they passed through their lands. Like so many of the

names pinned on African peoples by other races, "Nandi" was derogatory and is not in preferred usage today. These Kalenjins were fierce, determined warriors who sought to protect their land and families as the British penetrated deeper into Nandi territory to create trade routes to central Africa.

The Maasai were broken by the British relatively early. Their herds were decimated by rinderpest, resulting in a scattering of the tribal people. Thus the Maasai could create no united front, as could the Nandi. The Maasai *laibon* (spiritual leader), Lenana, befriended the British, who were then able to rule by indirect power: they ruled Lenana; Lenana ruled his people. The Maasai fought the British in ineffectual spurts. Usually the problems were centered around the Maasai proclivity for cattle-raiding. Settlers were never pleased about having their livestock stolen. But the Maasai were subdued. Karen Blixen (a.k.a. Isak Dinesen) wrote that they were "fighters who had been stopped from fighting, a dying lion with its claws clipped, a castrated nation. Their weapons have been taken from them, their big shields even, and in the Game reserve the lions follow their cattle." The Maasai were pushed onto reservations in Laikipia, north of Lake Nakuru, and Kajiado, southeast of Nairobi.

For a couple of centuries the Maasai engaged in war with the Kikuyu, raiding their animals and stealing their women. The Kikuyu were agricultural people establishing their *shambas* (farms) in the highlands or on Mt. Kenya. They were protected from the Maasai by the forest cover. As the Maasai became less of a threat, the Kikuyu began to descend to lower altitudes to build their farms. These lower areas were precisely the lands most coveted by the settlers, for their rich earth and ideal growing conditions. The British did not bother to find out that the land was ancestral Kikuyu territory and therefore thought nothing about taking it. The Kikuyu have a saying: *Gicigo kia mugunda gitiinyihaga*, which means, "A piece of land is no little thing." Thus, a little land well tilled is great wealth. Sometimes it seems that earth grows in the bones of the Kikuyu, so important is land to them. Land is to the Kikuyu what cattle are to the Maasai. This is not only because of land's productive power, but because land is the home of the ancestors. A Kikuyu with no land loses his connection with his past. In addition to the land itself, the settlers needed the Kikuyu to work the farms, and could only succeed in forcing them to do so by creating a need on the part of the Kikuyu. They accomplished this by imposing a hut tax on the Africans. To earn the money for taxes, the Kikuyu worked for the settlers. The Kikuyu are a proud, intelligent, industrious and family-oriented, loving people. Except for periodic scrapes, they did not vent their whole tribal resentment of the British until the Mau uprising in the 1950s.

These are very broad strokes and do not cover the nuances of tribal organization, which most settlers found impossible and tedious. The point is that the British were trying to bring the Africans to heel. Excerpts from the

River. Early on they spent time at the ranch, called Juja, of Sir Northrup McMillan, an important figure in colonial BEA. A wealthy American who had made his fortune in Malaysian rubber, McMillan had a vast estate of almost twenty-six thousand acres near Thika at the base of Ol Doinyo Sabuk. The name Juja itself came from the names of two West African gods, Ju and Ja. McMillan had brought carved images of the gods to his estate, in spite of the alleged curse visited on anyone who owned them. Ironically, the curse called for death by drowning and McMillan died at sea in 1928. The Juja house itself was imported in parts from England and reconstituted on the estate in 1905.

McMillan was a bon vivant with a capacity for generosity equal to his enormous bulk; he tipped the scales at over four hundred pounds. Juja house was used as a hospital for British officers from 1914 to 1918; McMillan picked up the entire tab and was rewarded for his altruism with knighthood. He kept a pet lioness chained by day to iron rings embedded in cement near the front door. An oft repeated story tells of McMillan's delight in watching his lioness in heat, in rut with a wild male; he sat chuckling away in his chair as his staff watched from behind locked doors.

Theodore Roosevelt had been a visitor at Juja a few months before the Akeley party arrived. He writes, in *African Game Trails*, about his lovely week of hunting at Juja, but fails to mention one of the shenanigans that he and McMillan were involved in during his stay. They had a party in Nairobi and at its conclusion, feeling that the night was still young, set out on a sophomoric prank: They took two stone idols from the gates at the Khoja Mosque and installed them by the fireplace at McMillan's Nairobi town house, Chiromo. The Muslims were outraged by the theft, and a few days later, while calling on other business, the district officer spotted the idols and advised McMillan to dispose of them quickly and quietly so as not to taint the reputation of TR.[9] McMillan seems to have been preoccupied with idols that caused him trouble.

The Akeley party camped on a site at Juja reserved for visiting safaris. McMillan was probably away at the time as there is no evidence of them meeting him for dinner or otherwise. The farm abounded in game and the expedition successfully collected antelopes for the museum during their days at Juja.

While Akeley's main goal on the safari was to collect elephants, both Fred and J.T. were more interested in lions, which were plentiful at Juja. Once one had been spotted nearby, a lion drive was organized in which thirty to forty porters beat the bush in an effort to flush out the animal for shooting. In spite of the effort and time involved, they never even spotted lion. That it was so difficult to find and hunt lions at a time when they were so numerous must seem incredible to anyone who has visited one of Kenya's game parks where the lions appear ubiquitous. Actually, it is easier to see all game today because they are habituated, if not to humans, at least to their vehicles, and wander or lounge around practically under the noses of safarists. Still, the lions' mere existence testifies to the admirable conservation efforts in Kenya.

After passing through Thika, Punda Milia (Zebra in Kiswahili), and Fort Hall, the party finally reached the Tana River where they remained for about two weeks. They chose a magnificent parklike setting along the river with spacious, grassy areas spotted with umbrella acacias, near where they had stayed before. The Tana River area was, and still is, notorious for breeding enormous and lethal mosquitoes. Most of the indigenous Africans had left the malaria-ridden area and as a result the game proliferated. For some reason the expedition party had no problem with *dudus* (Kiswahili for bugs), and the time spent there was not only productive but terribly enjoyable.

The rhinoceroses were a particular treat. The party saw hundreds of them. Akeley wanted to film them charging, so a good deal of time was spent inciting rhinos to charge for the camera. Fred and J. T. flanked Akeley with their guns readied in case there was a mishap. The rhino's eyesight is notoriously bad, but his nose and ears are excellent, so he charges in nonspecific spurts in the direction of a smell or sound. Therefore if a hunter can approach him from upwind he can easily kill the beast—which is one of the reasons this species dangles in the balance today. The animals raging charge could usually be averted by whistles or yells. The sportsmen's writings at the time all addressed the fierce and deadly charge of the animal, and indeed it can be so, but Akeley felt that they were more stupid than vicious: "He is the stupidest fellow in Africa . . . It is true that as soon as he smells a man he is likely to start charging around in the most terrifying manner, but the rhino is never cunning like the elephant, nor is his charge accurate like the lion, nor is the rhino vindictive like the leopard or the buffalo."[10]

One day near the Tana, a rhino came charging full blast towards Akeley, only to stop abruptly and take a nap as Akeley stood there amazed, adrenalin pumping through his body. There is a Bantu myth that explains the behavior of the rhino: Ngai (God) gave each animal a needle with which to sew on its own skin. The rhino took the needle in his mouth and ran off into the bush, searching for a place to sit down while he sewed. En route something scared him, and as he gasped, he gulped down the needle. The tale explains why the animals seem so ill-tempered, why their skin fits so poorly, and why they have the odd habit of scattering and examining their manure—they are still looking for that damn needle!

Akeley had constructed a special rhino "dummy," or blind, to get closer to the animals to make photographs. It looked like one of the horses used in vaudeville, in which two men are concealed in the body, while their legs, clothed in color-coordinated fabric, were exposed and free to move around. What is clever on the stage is outrageous in the bush; the blind was cumbersome, uncomfortable, and hot, and even worse, didn't fool the rhinos. They also had an ostrich blind, equally hilarious. But no one can fault Akeley's wild imagination and resolve to realize his fantasies.

During the filming, in spite of the constant harassment of rhinos to incite them to charge, only one animal was killed, and that killing was admittedly

done for the benefit of the camera. Another rhino was killed by Fred Stephenson. He tried to avert a charge by shooting his gun into the air, yelling, and waving his arms, but she just kept coming at him. After he shot her, frantic squealing filled the air and a young rhino dynamo charged. They realized that the charging female had been defending her youngster. The expedition party made a baby rhino carrier of soft zebra skin suspended from two long poles. Holes for the *toto's* (Kiswahili for child) legs were cut into the leather and they transported the baby to camp, feeding it milk for about ten days before it died.

Today we understand how difficult and time-consuming it is to raise a young rhino or elephant—they need constant companionship and attention for several years. The poaching of rhinos has become so severe today that we will invest vast amounts of time, labor, and money into saving even one rhino. In 1968 there were 65,000 rhinos in Africa, 1,000 in Meru National Park alone, the area near the Tana where Akeley and company camped. Today there are 3,500 rhinos left in all of Africa, and less than 400 in Kenya. There are absolutely none in Trans-Tana. In 1988, the five remaining animals, semi-domesticated white rhinos that had been introduced to Meru, were savagely cut down by automatic weapons and left hideously butchered by poachers who wanted only their horns.

A single horn can now bring $5,000 to $15,000 on the Asian retail market. The poacher may only see $40 for his effort, but in a country where the average yearly income is $320, it seems a fortune. The horn is keratinous material, like matted hair, and for centuries has been ground up in the Orient and used as medicine to treat a variety of ailments, from fever to insanity to impotence. But today the largest market is in Yemen, where the horns are carved into dagger handles, connoting virility and wealth for the wearers. The market exploded with the need for oil in the West, which created many more wealthy Yemenites than there used to be. With wealth came the demand for the accoutrements of affluence. And the poachers murderous weapons are killing off not only the animals, but the men who are assigned to guard them as well.

Carl Akeley would have been bereft to see what we see today: even in 1909 he was acutely and painfully aware of the world to which we have had to grow accustomed. We are seeing the sad realization of Akeley's prophecy: "The coming of the white man with a rifle upset all this [the natural balance of wildlife], but the rhino has learned less about protecting himself than the other animals."[11]

They hunted lions in Trans-Tana. Most good hunters understood the nature of the animals they hunted. They respected them on a more profound level than the sentimentalists, and spent hours discussing the nuances of a particular stalk or kill. In addition, Akeley possessed the curiosity of a scientist and an ethologist, probing even deeper into the nature of living

things. He had that enviable quality of being a man of both thought and action, and could sit for hours in quiet observation of animals without feeling fidgety or restless. Lions fascinated him.

There has been so much written about the lions for so many hundreds of years that it is clear that the creature fascinates nearly everyone. Even today safarists would rather stay and watch a pride of lions from a vehicle's window than anything else. Karen Blixen wrote in a letter home about her first experience with lions: "I shall never forget it. In their build, carriage, and movements lions possess a greatness, a majesty, which positively instills terror . . . and makes one feel later that everything else is trivial—thousands of generations of unrestricted supreme authority, and one is oneself set back 5,000 generations—suddenly comes to feel the mighty power of nature, when one looks it right in the eyes."

Akeley too felt deeply about lions and their noble natures. He observed that they would rather avoid fighting if possible, but when their fury was roused nothing could stop their charge. In the Trans-Tana area, Akeley made movies of lions as well as rhinos. He carried his camera while the others carried their guns and the porters beat the grass to scare out a hiding lioness. As the grass was very high, they had to push it down with their guns as they proceeded. At one point the grass was thrown back violently, almost throwing them over. They had pressed the grass down on a lioness's back. Despite this intrusion, she made off and did not attack them. They, however, went after her, pursuing her and trying her patience. After a bit of this she got fed up and charged; Fred shot her, making her even angrier, and she made straight for him. A second hit brought her down. Akeley was impressed with this behavior on the part of the lion and discussed it many times. In a way, the behavior was like his own; he would walk away from trouble but if provoked, he could be very mean and aggressive.

One evening after dinner, as they all sat around the campfire, conversation turned from the day's hunting events to capturing animals for American zoos. There was a hot communion about how deplorable zoo conditions were and the pity of caging in the splendid wild animals that surrounded them at their Tana camp. The discussion soon centered on primates, and on the filth and squalor in which they preferred to live, evidenced by their universally dirty zoo cages. Mickie took great exception to this and defended monkeys in particular, citing her observations on her previous expedition and addressing their fastidious habits in nature.

To prove her point, the next morning she and Bill baited a basket cage with corn to capture one. A young vervet monkey took the bait and was outraged and terrified when the cage closed around her. Mickie intended to release the animal a few days later after her companions could see firsthand that she was correct in her argument. But she made the mistake of naming her. The naming of animals usually implies a psychological and emotional