Betina, the female sumatrensis, and Vikki Ryhiner.

A PASSION FOR RHINOCEROS

Men have given their all for glory and gold, for love of woman and love of country, but few have traveled so far, or suffered so much, for such an ungainly beast.

By LEWIS H. LAPHAM

Peter Ryhiner introduced himself on the afternoon of a blizzard. A large and florid Swiss gentleman, he wore a fur hat and carried a canvas satchel. His red beard needed trimming; his eyes were melancholy. He said he had lost his rhinoceros.

I offered him a chair and sent out for coffee. For the next several days, speaking in a heavy guttural accent, he told his mournful tale. Nothing else mattered to him. The snow stifled all traffic in the city; the newspapers brought regular reports of famine, earthquake and revolution, but to Ryhiner these disturbances counted as petty trifles.

"My only object," he began, "is to save my rhino." And then, like a man admitting a fondness for golf or high-powered automobiles, he said, apologetically, "You know how it is when something gets hold of you."

I said I had a young cousin who felt the same way about field mice. He smiled bleakly and rummaged through his satchel for his maps and diaries.

It began, he said, with a Chinese travel agent in the lobby of the Trocadero Hotel in Bangkok. It was the summer of 1958, and he was traveling around the world with a white python that had eyes the color of sapphires. Being by trade a trapper of wild animals, Ryhiner also deals in gorillas, elephants and king cobras, but the market in animals that year had suddenly collapsed. Fortunately he had the snake, the only one of its kind on earth. He was employing it in a series of publicity stunts, posing with it in the windows of airlines offices or showing it off at cocktail parties and department-store openings.

The Chinese travel agent, however, ended all that by handing Ryhiner a brochure advertising the various attractions of Southeast Asia, among which was the shooting of rhinoceroses in the teak forests of northern Thailand.

The full extent of Ryhiner's anguish cannot be exaggerated. To most men a rhinoceros seems nothing more than a large and awkward pig, stupid, near-sighted and mean. But to Ryhiner the rhinoceros is a creature of unsurpassed loveliness, a beast on whose behalf he has suffered much.

The passion first took hold of him on the plains of Assam, where, in the winter of 1952, he captured a pair of one-horned Indian rhinoceroses [See MY BEAUTY AND MY BEASTS, by Peter Ryhiner, as told to Daniel P. Mannix, *The Saturday Evening Post*, May 24–June 7, 1958]. Every night on the subsequent voyage back to Switzerland he visited the animals in their cages, feeding them sugared palm leaves and learning to interpret their small squeaks. On the day that he at last delivered them to the zoo in Basel he refused to attend the ceremonial dinner in his own honor. He stayed instead in his hotel room, alone and woebegone, drinking himself into a maudlin stupor.

"A rhinoceros," he explained wistfully, "is a tame and affectionate creature. I was very sad."

For the next six years he roamed the world in search of lesser animals, contenting himself with only an occasional rumor of a rhinoceros in a distant thicket. He squandered his meager savings on the publication of a pamphlet titled, "Rhino S O S"—in which he defended the animal against the popular misconceptions concerning its malicious temperament. His first wife, failing to share his infatuation, divorced him in 1955.

Imagine, then, his dismay at the thought of so many tourists out after rhinoceroses. He realized at once that the rhino in question must be none other than the treasured *sumatrensis*, which, of the five species of rhinoceros still extant, is by far the most rare, so rare that many zoologists had actually thought it extinct. Also known as the "hairy dwarf," the *sumatrensis* is hunted down throughout Southeast Asia by orientals who believe, erroneously, that the powder ground from its horn serves as an incomparable aphrodisiac.

At the time there were no *sumatrensis* rhinoceroses in captivity and fewer than 40 such animals alive anywhere in the world. Ryhiner resolved to capture a male and a female for a European zoo, in hopes that the pair might produce offspring and so preserve the species.

"Obviously *something* had to be done," Ryhiner said. "The poor beast deserved a chance to survive into the next century."

The business of wild-animal trapping, however, is no longer the lighthearted affair that it was in the days of Frank Buck. Thirty years ago a man simply slogged off into the jungles, took his chances with fever, snakes and poison darts, and emerged, sooner or later, with a collection of assorted animals. He carted them off to a civilized country, where zoo keepers were happy to take them off his hands.

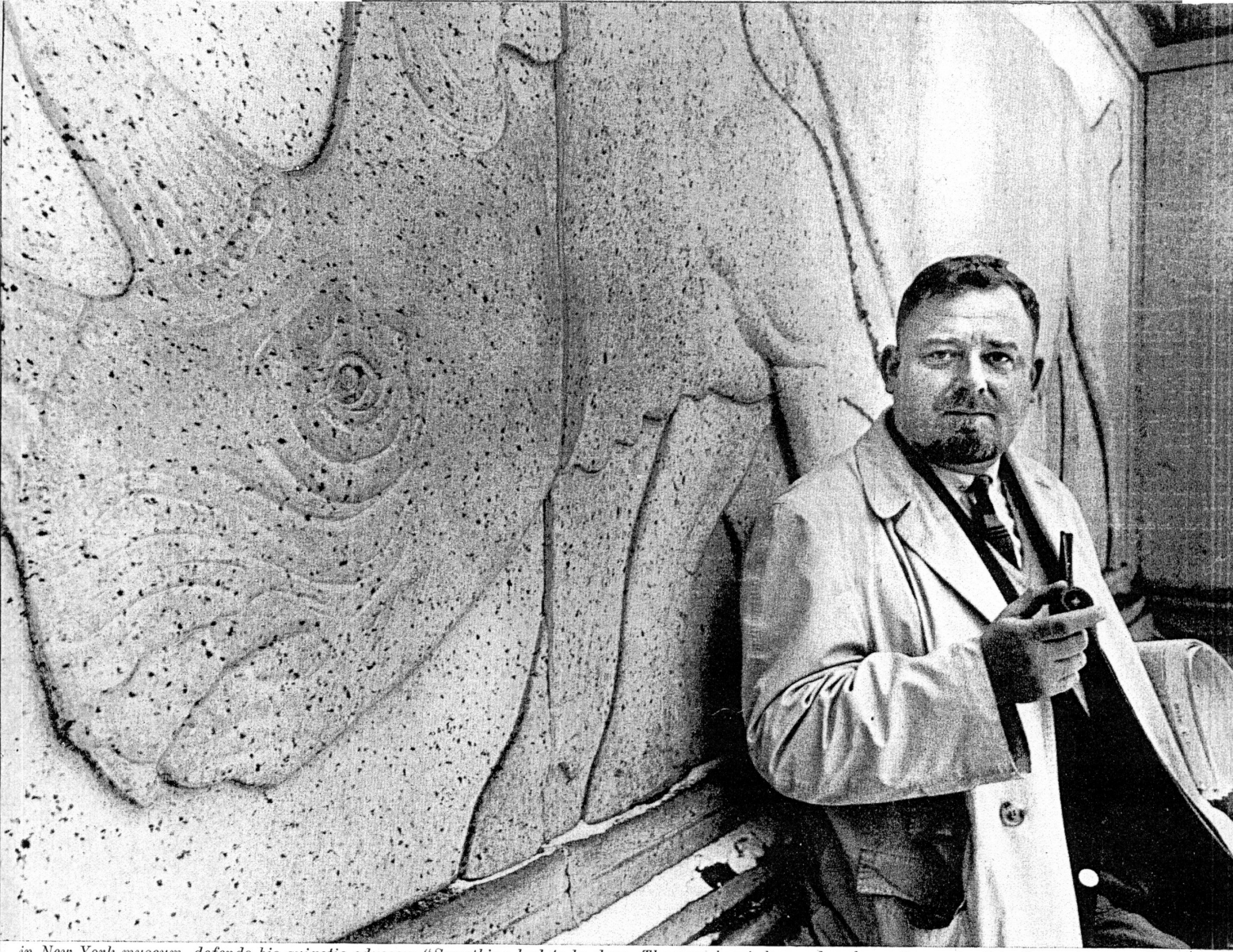
The present procedures are more complicated. Together with the snakes and poison darts, there are also currency restrictions, high transportation costs and uncertain political situations in the newly independent nations that invariably harbor the rarest animals. Ryhiner gladly accepted all the risks.

Guessing that any rhinoceros in Thailand must have strayed across the border from Burma, he sent urgent telegrams to U Tun Yin, a Burmese zoologist, and to Harry Gillmore, an American citizen employed by the Standard Vacuum Oil Company in Central Sumatra.

He had met U Tun Yin on previous occasions and knew him as a man friendly to the cause of rhinoceros. About Gillmore he had heard improbable but nevertheless intriguing rumors. It was said in the bazaars of Bangkok that Gillmore lived at the end of the pipeline on the Siak River, in a remote station on the edge of the impenetrable forest, and that there, among Indonesians who thought him a god, he kept a hairy dwarf rhino for a pet.

From the Burmese, Ryhiner received prompt encouragement. U Tun Yin sent word that at least 14 *sumatrensis* had been seen in the Kachin hills. The Burmese government would approve the expedition. Gillmore did not respond to his telegrams, and Ryhiner therefore decided to try for the animals in Burma. He returned immediately to Europe, leaving his snake with friends who promised to feed it a live mouse every other day. After four months of negotiation

Ryhiner, by stone freize of African rhino



in New York museum, defends his quixotic odyssey: "Something had to be done. The poor beast deserved a chance to survive into the next century."

he managed to secure a contract with the Basel zoo. Ryhiner agreed to bring back both a male and a female *sumatrensis*. The zoo advanced $40,000 for the cost of the expedition.

He left Switzerland the night he signed the contract, the same night his second wife Vicki gave birth to their first child. Such is the enchantment that a rhinoceros can cast upon a man that Ryhiner did not stay long enough to learn if the delivery was successful or if the baby was a boy or a girl.

Again he smiled apologetically, interrupting the headlong rush of his narrative. "You must try to understand," he said, "how I feel about rhinos; it seemed proper to go as soon as possible."

I told him that my cousin sometimes refused to speak to his mother for a week if she disturbed his field mice. Ryhiner nodded in sympathetic understanding. "When I was a boy," he said, "I kept guinea pigs, salamanders, toads and a small crocodile."

Fearful that he might digress into nostalgic reminiscence, I asked him to continue with his story.

From Switzerland he went to Ceylon and thence to Singapore, where he found a letter from the mysterious Gillmore. On a ragged scrap of paper, Gillmore wrote that he had two *sumatrensis* grazing in the yard behind his house and that he would be delighted to get rid of them.

"You can imagine my feelings," Ryhiner said. "Good Lord, my dear fellow, as rare an animal as exists in the world, standing around somebody's backyard!"

Even though he knew that a civil war was then in progress in Sumatra, he canceled his Burma trip. Three days later, on December 5, 1958, he boarded a plane for Pakanbaru on the upper reaches of the Siak River.

Ryhiner was met at the airport by a small man in a straw hat who gave him a note from Gillmore. The note explained that the man could be trusted, and that he would conduct Ryhiner to Gillmore's station at Buatan, 30 miles farther down the river toward the Strait of Malacca.

The journey on the river took three hours in a dugout canoe equipped with an outboard engine. The river was sluggish and brown, yawing in wide curves, heavy with silt. An occasional hut, thatched with palm leaves, stood on poles set into the muddy banks. Bright-colored parrakeets screeched from the lower branches of the mangrove trees.

On the boat landing at Buatan, Harry Gillmore stood under a banyan tree, a tall and sorrowful man wearing faded khaki pants. He was then superintendent for the terminal of the pipeline that ran 100 miles inland to the Standard Vacuum oil fields at Lirik. The natives called him "*Tuan Besar*" or "The Big Man." He had been at Buatan for four years and had taught a number of monkeys how to operate a water faucet.

"We shook hands," Ryhiner said. "For me it was like Stanley meeting Doctor Livingstone."

Ryhiner, of course, asked to be taken directly to the rhinoceros. Gillmore led him around behind the house and there, switching away flies with her short tail, stood "Dimples." She was a full-grown *sumatrensis*, named by Gillmore in honor of a girl he had once admired in Murphysboro, Ill.

"It was the most fantastic thrill I've ever had in my life," Ryhiner said. "I couldn't say a word."

He sat dumfounded on the ground for two or three hours, gazing at Dimples, lost in a lovely dream. The object of Ryhiner's affections, like all rhinoceroses, first appeared about 50,000,000 years ago, in the Eocene period, which distinguishes it as one of earth's most antique animals. The *sumatrensis* is the smallest of the five living species, standing four feet high at the shoulder and weighing 1,500 pounds. (The other species are the black and the square-lipped rhinoceros, both indigenous to Africa; the Indian rhinoceros, and the *sondaicus* found on the island of Java.) The *sumatrensis* has two horns, both of which are in fact growths of hair. The first horn is a foot long; the second, between two and three inches long, supposedly contains the properties of an aphrodisiac. The animal has good hearing but weak eyesight. During the day it wallows in mud, and at night it forages for food, chiefly leaves, sugar cane and mangoes.

When Ryhiner had regained his composure, Gillmore introduced him to his other pets, a tapir named Henry and a baby elephant named Plop. Ryhiner hardly glanced at them. As for the second rhinoceros, the male of the pair, Gillmore said it was safe within a stockade in the forest, 20 miles away. Ryhiner's success seemed assured.

In order to export the animals from

Sumatra, however, Ryhiner needed the permission of the Indonesian government. He therefore had to go to Bogor on the island of Java and petition the Indonesian Nature Conservation Service.

Ryhiner presented his credentials at Bogor on January 6, 1959, and found the labyrinths of the Indonesian bureaucracy far more treacherous than the comparatively straightforward perils of the jungle. Bewildered by the number of petty officials who claimed authority over rhinoceroses, he went from office to office, protesting that his intentions were honorable and that he only wanted to save the *sumatrensis* for future generations. He produced photographs of a female Indian rhinoceros giving birth in the Basel zoo, thus demonstrating that such animals could prosper and multiply in captivity. He told ghastly tales of Malayan poachers who drank the blood of butchered rhinoceroses in the belief that the blood gave them strength and valor.

Although impressed by Ryhiner's passionate eloquence, the Indonesians could do nothing because their laws expressly forbade the export of any rhinoceroses. Finally, though, at the end of February, they decided to make an exception and grant him the necessary permit. They did this, he believes, only because he could wiggle his ears.

"Every time I went to see the director of the Conservation Service," he said, "I wiggled my ears for the man's children. Finally they began to talk to their father of the funny man with the funny ears. [Ryhiner's ears are extremely large and wiggle impressively.] I think the fellow gave me the permit to please his children."

The permit also required Ryhiner to build, at his own expense, a concrete enclosure at the zoo in Bogor, presumably for a rhinoceros that the government hoped later to capture for itself. Ryhiner paid 100,000 rupiah—a sum roughly equivalent at the time to $2,250—for the construction of the enclosure, and hurried back to Buatan.

He found his dreams in ruins. Gillmore, falsely accused of smuggling animals on and off oil tankers, had fallen into disfavor with the Indonesian government. His contract with Standard Vacuum had expired and, without the company's protection, he had been forced to release the two rhinoceroses. Harassed by the police, no longer esteemed by the natives, he was now living unhappily on the outskirts of the settlement.

"A bad moment," Ryhiner said; "a very bad moment."

A week later, however, the faithful Dimples obligingly walked back into the stockade in which Gillmore had first trapped her. Ryhiner welcomed her effusively, and renamed her "Betina"—to avoid any association with the luckless Gillmore. On March 17, fearful that the Indonesian government might discover the ruse, he took her out of the country aboard a motor launch belonging to the Standard Vacuum Oil Company.

All the way across the Strait of Malacca Ryhiner sat beside the animal's cage, drinking warm beer and listening to American jazz on the radio.

"I could have kissed the whole world," he said. "The sky never seemed so blue or the sea so calm."

His wife, safely delivered of a baby girl, met him at the pier in Singapore. He bought her a new dress and the best dinner in town. Together they celebrated their good fortune over a period of three weeks, sending a flurry of triumphant telegrams to zoologists everywhere in Europe and the United States.

At the end of the third week Ryhiner's wife accompanied Betina (alias Dimples) and an assortment of subsidiary animals on their long flight back to Switzerland in a chartered DC-3. The animals on the plane, besides the rhinoceros, included 2 black panthers, 2 clouded leopards, a cage of myna birds, 8 giant frogs, 2 tapirs, 400 Java monkeys and 2 small elephants. The flight lasted the better part of a week.

"Vikki doesn't mind these things," Ryhiner said. "She has no commercial sense, but she's a good animal-keeper."

Unloaded in a wooden crate labeled "Rhino Ryhiner's Flying Ark," Betina was received in Basel with much pomp and ceremony. The newspapers published her photograph on the front pages; the president of the zoo made a fine speech.

Without a male *sumatrensis*, however, Ryhiner's mission could not be judged a success. Eventually Betina must die, and, unless she gave birth, the species would die with her.

Ryhiner returned to Sumatra, confidently expecting to collect a male rhinoceros before the end of the spring rains. But at Buatan the situation had been complicated in his absence by the arrival of a second expedition in search of rhinoceroses. This expedition was commanded by two Danes: Arne Dyhrberg, a taxidermist authorized to capture a *sumatrensis* for the Bogor zoo—to be kept in the enclosure that Ryhiner built—and Hakon Skafte, a journalist sent to fetch a *sumatrensis* for the zoo at Copenhagen.

Ryhiner resented their intrusion, but they had political connections in Bogor that could not be ignored. Reluctantly he agreed to join them, allowing them the use of his traps. It was understood that the first male rhinoceros caught would belong to Ryhiner.

"I never completely trusted either one of them," he said, "but what choice did I have?"

The three men remained in the jungle for the rest of the summer, living in tree huts made from leaves and flattened bark. Their camp was set so far from the river that even at noon only a weak and feeble light reached through the high branches of the immense trees. At night they baited their traps with salt and durian fruit. During the oppressively hot days they played poker dice, gathered wild orchids, listened to the cicadas or observed the comings and going of ants.

"Anything to keep one's mind occupied," Ryhiner said. "Otherwise you would go mad in that dreadful place."

His troubles never ceased. Herds of elephants trampled through the jungle and periodically destroyed the traps. Soldiers from local military garrisons came with machine guns, slaughtering whatever animals they could find for food and frightening those that escaped. The steady rains brought sudden floods. The Indonesian skinners attached to the expedition bickered among themselves and refused to watch the traps at night for fear of tigers.

In late August, Ryhiner's visa expired. The two Danes persuaded him to go to Bogor to renew it.

"They wanted me out of the way," Ryhiner said. "They were in it for the money and the glory and not for the sake of rhino."

The same day Ryhiner arrived in Bogor the Indonesian government announced the devaluation of its currency. In the general confusion and swindling that followed the announcement, Ryhiner lost the rest of the money advanced to him by the Basel zoo. He suddenly owed another 600,000 rupiah for the enclosure at the zoo in Bogor. He tried to buy the currency on the black market but was cheated by a Chinese tea merchant.

"It was a fearful situation," he said.

The final calamity, however, had yet to befall him. On September 30 he received word that his chief skinner, a man from Surabaja named Sabran, had actually caught a male rhinoceros. Throughout the summer Sabran had remained loyal to Ryhiner, ignoring the orders of the two Danes and setting his traps in a different part of the forest.

Once again, like an innocent soul who keeps thinking that next time for sure he will guess which shell the pea is under, Ryhiner gave way to transports of wild delight. He fired off telegrams. He went to the Swiss embassy and got gloriously drunk on champagne.

His triumph collapsed the next morning when a woebegone Sabran arrived in Bogor. The rhinoceros, he said, had escaped. For three days and three nights Sabran had squatted on top of the trap in the jungle. He became sick from malaria, but hung on. Skafte, the journalist, abandoned the camp for a weekend in Pakanbaru. Dyhrberg was entertaining the Danish trade commissioner who had come to Sumatra for a brief visit.

The Indonesian skinners employed by the two Danes refused to let Sabran nail together the wooden poles of the trap. The trap, they said, belonged to the Indonesian government and should not be damaged. On the third day, Sabran, weak from the malaria, could hold out no longer. He went to get help. When he returned, the rhinoceros was gone. It had butted its head against the poles, working them loose from the sand.

Ryhiner subsided into a gloomy silence, crushing his hat between his large hands and staring morosely at his thick-soled shoes.

"Well, my friend," he said at last, "that's the end of the story. I had the only male *sumatrensis* captured in this century, and I lost him."

He began to stuff his papers back into his satchel, a forlorn smile passing across his broad face as he looked at the photographs that he had taken of Dimples on that first sunny afternoon in the yard behind Gillmore's house.

He said his white snake succumbed from an infection two years ago in the zoo at Zurich, where he left it for a few months while he was off giving lectures on the plight of the rhinoceros.

I asked him if he hoped to return to Sumatra. "No," he said sadly, "the government refuses to grant any more permits, and the Basel zoo claims that I owe it $10,000 for not bringing back the male."

For several minutes he looked absently out the window, brooding on the cruel ironies of his quest. Beyond the drifting snow and the city traffic he seemed to see a green and distant land, loud with the noise of tropical birds and crowded with rhinoceroses. He suddenly smiled.

"But," he said, "I know another place where I might find one, and if I can raise the money. . . ."

Then the smile faded; he got heavily to his feet, bowed politely and trudged toward the door.

"Perhaps you should tell your cousin to forget about his field mice," he said, making a ponderous joke. "You never know what might come of it." THE END