

## 'Lions & Tigers & Bears, O My?' NO: Rampaging Elephants & an African Rhino's Escape to Freedom during the Civil War!

Exotic animals within the United States are a fact taken for granted, especially when one visits the multiple 'zoological gardens' or zoos, scattered throughout the country. Many circuses as well have been renowned for their non-human participants, the first circus having been held in Philadelphia on April 3, 1793, by John Bill Ricketts. As is well-known, *camels* were actually imported very early into the United States as well, and during the 19th century were actually utilized by the military and postal service in the arid Western states, some purportedly still seen 'in the wild' in Arizona and elsewhere, long after their demise or use was discontinued.

However, exotic animals have begun to be a problem in many parts of the country, from the almost legendary 'alligators in the sewers' of New York City, to an actual pandemic infestation of non-native boa constrictors and other species, turned loose within the Florida Everglades, as witnessed recently by specials on the *Animal Planet* T.V. Channel and as described recently in an article of the **New Yorker** magazine.

Besides those animals turned loose willingly and often illegally by their owners into America's cities or rural regions; a multitude of creatures have eluded and 'escaped' their human captors, only to roam the streets, waterways and countryside of many parts of the nation throughout our history. As recently as 2008, after a string of tornadoes had swept through Kansas, a couple of circus elephants escaped and enjoyed a short-lived period of liberty, as they roamed the streets of Wichita, prior to their recapture.

The above elephants however were not the first to 'go on a rampage' through a populated area. For example, several individuals were injured by a large pachyderm named *Hannibal*, whose 3,500 pound bulk escaped his keeper near Pawtucket, Rhode Island in June of 1854, only to 'run amok' for miles and soon toss into the air both the horses and wagons of a Mr. Stafford Short, Thomas W. Peck, a Mr. Pearce, Barney and Eddy. Finally *Hannibal's* keeper, procured an axe and eventually found the animal exhausted, lying in some bushes near Slade's Ferry. Here he was recaptured and "secured with chains," putting an end to his 'burst for freedom.'

Mr. Edward S. Bradley and his wife, of East St. Louis in January of 1871, were awakened one night as they believed, by "burglars." Bradley arose, and "grasping a huge cavalry sword, stationed himself at the window" in the upstairs of his dwelling. Imagine his surprise when he heard a "sudden crash...from below," his wife scream, clutching as she thought "*the retreating leg of a man*," only to discover that it "had a queer feel," and was instead attached to "*the towering bulk of an enormous elephant*" who had burst into side of their home. Mr. Bradley struck the proboscis or trunk of the elephant with a few strikes of his sword, causing the elephant to retreat. The creature simply changed its course and soon "shivered a large door to atoms" of the saloon of Mr. Charles Schaffner. Later the elephant was found dead, as was believed as a result of the "effects of the cold." This particular elephant had escaped a railroad car, broken the chain that secured its leg and tore down the door and began his "voyage of death."

After having ridden within rail-cars from Chicago, in April of 1910, a number of pachyderms were responsible for the injury of individuals and the destruction of a large portion of property, "*nine elephants that stampeded*" through the streets and nearby fields of Danville, Illinois. Coal sheds, fences, trees, frame structures, all were "trodden down, uprooted and thrown to one side" according to newspaper accounts of the event. While sitting at his kitchen table, Mr. William Miller found himself confronted by three elephants who'd found the area between his "summer kitchen and house" insufficient room in order for them to pass, "so they pushed the kitchen aside," but no one was injured.

Joseph Peebles wasn't as lucky. His shed was overturned, horse killed and he was thrown by one of the elephants "against the side of his house," leaving him in critical condition. Eventually the elephants were captured but not until they had damaged 100 homes, destroyed gardens and orchards, and injured F. Krabbe, one of their keepers who was "hurled against the side of a barn and injured..." Out of the nine 'escapees,' one elephant would elude his would-be captors for sometime until being caught.

Residents of Philadelphia in September of 1876, witnessed a Texas '*wild steer at large*,' which had escaped a slaughterhouse on Market Street, "run at a rapid rate" through center city, eventually reaching the corner of 18th Street & Pennsylvania Ave., after having attacked "a man, woman and child" and then gored or threw Thomas Maguire to the ground with violence, only to eventually be "killed with an axe by Fred Foshill and others."

Another "Big White Bull" in November of 1905 tore "down Broad Street" in the City of Brotherly Love, an animal which had "broken away from a herd at Fitzwater Street." Described in the local papers as "bellowing with rage, the animal charged everything that appeared to bar its way." For some twenty minutes the white bull bellowed and frightened residents on Broad Street until finally "*a small boy*" with a "stout stick" went within ten feet of the bull and waited for it to charge. As it did so, he wisely "eluded the bull's rushes" with the "agility of a professional boxer" and wisely "planted a stinging blow across the nose of the enraged animal," not once but twice! This caused the creature to "retreat up Broad street," followed closely by the unnamed boy who "kept right at its heels" until he reached Fitzwater Street and successfully drove the animal back into the herd.

### **Escapes of the Rhinoceros:**

'Gondar the Rhinoceros,' a 1,590 pound wonder, was once well-known in Philadelphia in late 1830 and early 1831, as advertised in *Poulson's American Daily Advertiser*. Though he is not known to have escaped in Philadelphia, his fellow 'horned' kinsmen if you will, did indeed at times in other parts of the country.

In 1869, in Putnam County, New York, the "rhinoceros of Van Amburgh's menagerie" escaped and decided to take a bath in Peach Pond, at Carmel. Worth about \$20,000, his keepers were desirous to retake the animal, and sent a dog named *Jack* into the water in an attempt to retrieve the huge beast. Unlike the dog, the rhino simply submerged himself under water for sometime, and re-emerged at a distance, with *Jack* grabbing the animal by the ear, causing him to "bellow like a bull calf for many minutes," until he was finally snared with ropes as he returned to the shore and then returned to his cage.

At Red Burd, a small town in Monroe County, Illinois, in August of 1872, while being led into the ring of the circus by 24 men, his nose having a ring connected to two wire ropes, suddenly bolted, "threw up his head, and plunging madly to the right and left, broke loose...and dashed forward through the tents." A man named John Gillem, an employee of the circus was

trampled to death, while another canvasman, Martin Ready, was struck by the rhino, which ripped out his bowels and thus killed him.

Charging towards the seats of the ticket-paying public who'd wisely cleared out, the enraged rhino knocked the structures down, dislocated the shoulder of one man and broke the arm of one of the spectators in the process. He also knocked down the tent pole where the cages of the tiger and leopard were placed, and soon dashed out into the street and ran into the door of a vacant house, where he was finally captured.

Perhaps the most notorious 'run' of an escaped exotic animal, was that which occurred in the summer of 1861, when a rhino enjoyed '*twelve days of freedom*,' basking in part along the left bank of the Mississippi River, at the mouth of the LaCrosse River, near LaCrosse, Wisconsin, located some ninety miles from Prairie du Chien. Thus, while the nation was embroiled in a Civil War, *in part over the enslavement of African-Americans*, an *African Rhino* was engaged in its own private conflict over confinement or liberty, and thus enjoyed for a time its own *escape from captivity!*

On August 10th, 1861, the steamers *Key City* and the *Luzerne* collided near the vicinity of LaCrosse on the Mississippi. On board the latter vessel was the animal menagerie or circus of famed showman and former clown, *Dan Rice*, which contained among other beasts, a "*trained rhinoceros, weighing over 4,000 pounds...*" At first it was believed the creature had drowned, but in a couple of days, it was observed "*frolicking in the Mississippi, but sank on being approached.*"

The rhino's favorite 'resort,' was that of a *slough*, a place of deep mud or marshy area lying in a depression of dry land, as on a prairie. Near to his 'waterhole,' was a Mr. Munger's cornfield, where the creature was said to have enjoyed filling '*his capacious belly with corn,*' which would prove to be his weakness and eventual place of capture. This however would not occur, until all the best minds and sportsmen in the area, would attempt repeatedly to ensnare the rhino, only to be outsmarted by the beast or fall victim to their own ingenious attempts at entrapment.

For example, on one attempt to recapture the rhino, a platform was placed in the branches of the trees under which the rhino passed on his way in and out of the water. Ropes were suspended, so that when he came to feed, the noose could be slipped over his head. After waiting for three hours one day, with three large ropes attached to the limbs of trees and five men stationed upon the platform to control them, the rhino "*waddled out of the slough, snuffed the air, shook the water from his eyes, and with heavy tread clambered up the bank toward the cornfield.*"

Passing under the platform where the men were hidden, a noose was draped over the rhino's head, but before they could tighten it, the creature bellowed, wheeled and rushed back to the water. The rope broke, the men "*came tumbling down to the ground, while the monster rushed to the water, with sixty odd feet of inch rope fast to its body.*"

So fearful were the farmers in the area of working their fields, that they were insisting "*a cannon shell be sent them with which to forever stop the roaming of this Behemoth...*" Dan Rice its owner was against it since the creature was worth some \$20,000 dollars. Yet the rhino had already surprised two men roasting corn on the river bank, when they heard "*a heavy tramp and in a few moments the Rhinoceros appeared...*" One of the men was thrown sixty feet resulting in a broken arm and two ribs.

Eventually, *Col. Preston*, an agent of Rice succeeded in catching the rhino as it came to feed in Mr. Munger's corn-field, by the aid of a chain-trap and ropes. Those who helped in the recapture of the beast were rewarded with \$200.00 and the rhino was eventually taken to Milwaukee.

Animals formerly a part of the menagerie of Dan Rice, escaped in Ohio in 1866, or "*two large boa constrictors*" and "*an alligator*" who "*taking possession of a field near at hand,*" were successful in "*driving out the cattle and sheep in a very short space of time.*" However, they were soon recaptured as well.

Crocodiles, snakes and alligators would continue to appear in newspapers throughout the 19th century, as having escaped, some being retaken or killed, while others were never found. Such tales and events are a part of American history, many of which can be found in the collections of The Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

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