

ON THE IMPORTANCE OF ELEPHANTS

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By Theolonius McTavish

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— Or, can you tell me where I can find "Babar", "Dumbo" or "Topsy"? —

According to Google, 826,000 websites are devoted to the topic of elephants.

Just imagine what would life be like if there were no behemoths rambling about to give someone a bad-hair day?

Actually these boisterous bruisers have been around for millennia; so long in fact that 4,000 years ago, people in the Indus Valley decided it was about time to tame them.

Besides hauling around oodles of stuff, including monarchs and their entourages, the plump pachyderms became the weapon of choice for ancient warriors with lots of time on their hands. After all, no one moves quickly in a military campaign using `Babar', `Dumbo' or `Topsy'; everyone that is except Hannibal, who in 218 BC took a joy ride with 37 elephants over the Alps to win the Second Punic War.

Not to be outdone by the continental hordes, nor content to be just 'King of the Castle', the British boasted of their intention to rule the whole wide world before engineers laid claim to that feat first. To that end, they thought a few elephants might do the trick. So, the Royal Navy got busy and named two 18th century storage vessels and a gun-ship, "HMS Elephant", (in spite of the fact that gun-powder had rendered the elephant obsolete as a high-performance fighting machine).

Wars involving blessedly big beasts and man-made monsters would soon fall by the wayside, in favor of the more popular "rat race", (a leisure activity pursued by ripsnorting rodents and robber-baron wannabes). Clearly, the elephant would need a new reason for being if it was going to survive the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune.

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Since pet rocks, silly putty and slinkies had not yet been invented, the rich and famous still needed something to amuse themselves. Elephants looked like a good idea at the time. So, with a new lease on life, these hefty hairless creatures became objects of affection and "must-have" items of conspicuous consumption for several dudes of distinction. French Emperor Charlemagne acquired a hungry household pet named "Abul-Abbas", while Pope Leo X, (with few friends around to chew the fat and down a pint of grog), found solace through a spiritual connection to his non-ruminating hoofed animal companion, "Hanno".

With far too many elephants and sacred cows hanging around and taking up space on the planet, not to mention scads of young men with blunderbusses, and numerous old bucks bored out of their trees romping around the back forty, a new trophy sport emerged to keep these testy titans occupied. While

the lads were enthusiastically engaged in "offing" the floundering floppy-eared things plodding about the plains of Africa — the taxidermists enjoyed a booming business upon their return. Apparently, the only ones who complained bitterly about the trophy hunt were those left behind — an odd assortment of neglected nitpicking nags, abandoned paramours, and inconsolable damsels-in-distress.

Seeing the "Old World" get all the credit for coming up with ways to tame or trounce elephants, the "New World" cowboys were a tad ticked off. The pursuit of happiness pioneers, (with precious little to do in the "home of the brave"), decided it was high time to kick butt for a change. So, they tossed the yoke of yucky British tea, put an end to the tyranny of tasteless crumpets, and created new job opportunities for bronco-busters (in a country with vanishing buffalo, no elephants, and a wide array of flea-bitten mules). A glorious and bright future lay ahead for those who dared to ride bulls bareback, or those willing to take up less stressful occupations such as tenderfooted cowpokes, barnyard groomers, and burger flippers.

It seems however that the American patriots really missed not having any slow-moving big bad beasts to ride or moth-eaten mammoths in the rec-room to show off to inquisitive neighbors. In fact, so adoring were they of the absent gargantuan, grumpy, four-footed mammal that they decided to give it a prominent political position in their country, as the symbol of the US Republican Party.

Speaking of elephants**, Abraham Lincoln certainly recognized the virtue of having long, flexible-snouted folks as friends and allies, even if the other side didn't. More importantly, he knew how to manage a herd of elephants in a democratic society. Never stand in front, behind or under them, and according to Abe, "When you have got an elephant by the hind leg, and he is trying to run away, it's best to let him run."

Of course, letting elephants run the affairs of state had the unintended consequence of fewer job opportunities for bonified politicians, pundits and policy analysts. That's why the equal opportunity folks in America encouraged the adoption of 'donkeys' as the symbol of the Democratic Party.

The best laid plans of the pragmatists did not however appear to be working all that well. To top it all off, the growing number of "white elephants" and "jackasses" everywhere began to cause a commotion. Something had to happen and fast!

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The answer came in the form of several delightful diversions. An ingenious circus promoter named P.T. Barnum found a way to make people laugh and make pots of moolah from the likes of a great gallumping galoot named "Jumbo". The tradition continued with a magical movie mogul named Walt Disney. He was the man behind a fictional, flying elephant named "Dumbo", a "Daffy Duck" and a mouse named "Mickey", not to mention profitable outdoor theme parks built to house all the critters and mollify the munchkin families.

While it's true that British author A.A. Milne created an elusive, honey-eating, flat-footed fictional character named "Heffalump" to keep Piglet and friends happy, thanks to the invention of television and the American edu-tainment industry, millions of tiny tots around the globe will never forget "Sesame Street" and an unusual wooly mammoth named, "Aloysius Snuffleupgas". Nor will they forget the Dr. Seuss tale about "Horton", an endearing elephant, and incidentally the only being on Earth who's aware of an entire civilization of wee folk living on a single dandelion.

So, if you think that elephants are an endangered species...you might want to think again. They seem to be alive and doing rather well in game preserves, zoos, theme parks, museums, books and

television shows. And if you haven't had your fill of elephants, why not enjoy their starring role in a new Disney film, entitled "Pooh's Heffalump Movie", to be released on February 11, 2005.

(Note: Heffalump Hunters Beware - bagged beasts are simply not in the cards for you next year, so stop whining and take up tiddlywinks or croquet! And for those who are valiantly trying to tell their family and friends about the proverbial 'elephant in the living room' — they can't hear you — they're too worried about a bull in the china shop or what to wear for Halloween!)

**The importance of elephants should not be underestimated as revealed in the famous last words of a U.S. Civil War general (one John Segwick), who learned his lesson the hard way. In answer to his troops' urgings to take cover, he replied in a short-sighted if not stupefying manner, "They couldn't hit an elephant at this dist-."

Theolonius McTavish is an eccentric collector of odd facts and things that go bumpy bump bump bump in broad daylight. He also moonlights as a visiting wordpecker in the court of The Quipping Queen at www.quippingqueen.blogspot.com.

Elephants and Teenagers

By Rachel Lower

Something eerily familiar happened in KwaZulu-Natal's Hluhluwe-Umfolozi Park in Africa recently.

The adult elephants were taken away and the orphaned youngsters were left to fend for themselves.

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The youngsters started the path to sexual maturity. The young boys were going into lengthy 'musths', as a dog would go into heat, much longer than a normal elephant in a normal setting.

The boys ganged together. They started raping and killing white rhinos, an endangered species. They were displaying extreme aggression. The park authorities were very concerned.

Someone had the idea to bring in ten adult bulls to "straighten out" the gang of elephant thugs.

Sure enough, the mature males put the band of so called 'delinquent juveniles' in their place. The adults were reintroduced, and life turned back to normal. No more killings. The elephants and rhinos were at peace again.

Obviously, strong male and female presence's are needed in these elephants lives. The young elephants needed the adults from when they were defenseless babies through the time they were in their elephant 'teenage' years.

In the meantime, over in the United States of America there was another gang related murder in your city. Another fatherless, semi or fully orphaned teenager shot a man and then reported back to his or her gang of 'delinquent juveniles'.

Perhaps we should take a lesson from the elephants.

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