

**OTA'S EPIC**  
**Stories for My Brothers**  
**Carrie Allen McCray, Author and Poet**

Narrative Poem about Ota Benga, the Gentle *Pygmy*  
From the Congo Forest Who was Brought  
to America and Exhibited in the Bronx Zoo  
In a Cage with an Ape

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**FOREWORD**

This narrative poem is a tribute to Ota Benga, the strong, yet gentle man from the deep Congo Forest. Ota was brought over here to America first in 1904 and again in 1906 by Samuel Phillips Verner, Presbyterian Minister from America, who served as missionary to the Congo. This was during the frenzied time of anthropologists trying to prove the darker races a lower form of man.

In 1904, many other persons of the darker races from around the world were brought over and exhibited in the St. Louis World's Fair Anthropology Unit: *Eskimo natives from Alaska, the Ainu from Japan, natives from the Philippines, Indian tribes from America, Zulus, Balubas and "Pygmies" from Africa.*<sup>1</sup>

In 1906, Ota was brought back over here by Verner, who falling on hard times, left him in the Museum of Natural History with the unscrupulous director, Bumpus, who exhibited him. Ota, a strong proud man, reacted to this so Bumpus contacted Verner, whom Ota called "Fwela" (leader) to come get him. Ota was then placed by Verner with Hornaday, Director of the Bronx ZOO, who placed him in a cage with an ape and exhibited him.

His story was in all the newspapers and African-American ministers and others across the nation protested. My mother's first husband, Professor Gregory Willis Hayes, was one of those protesters. Professor Hayes was president of Virginia Seminary in Lynchburg, Virginia and was also chairman of the National Black Baptist Education Committee. Professor Hayes offered Ota his home as a place to live and an opportunity for education in the lower school of the seminary, just across the road from the Hayes home.

Professor Hayes and his wife, Mary, were members of the early Pan-African movement, having been encouraged by Chilembwe, who earlier attended the seminary. Later Chilembwe led his country to freedom from British rule<sup>2</sup>. Professor Hayes was a strong man, committed to freedom. Born a slave, after freedom he went on to graduate from Oberlin College with honors and to be the first African-American speaker at graduation there. The town newspaper compared his speaking ability to that of Frederick Douglas.<sup>3</sup>

I have a personal interest in the story of Ota Benga, brave and proud man from the Congo, as he lived in our home, not in the home of Anne Spencer, my mother's dearest friend and one of the Harlem Renaissance poets. Her son, Chauncey, misled the authors of *Ota Benga, the Pygmy in the Zoo.*<sup>4</sup> This, even after my brother, Hunter Hayes, gave them the truth. Chauncey's story was

unfortunate because it went around the world as truth; and my mother not even mentioned in Bradford and Blum's book.

Ota lived in the Hayes home only six months when Professor Hayes. Ota's sponsor, became seriously ill and died. Ota had to be returned to the orphanage in Brooklyn. However, in 1910, he asked to return to Lynchburg, and Mary Hayes, now Mary Hayes Allen, and her sons were happy for Ota's return to the home. Mary Hayes had married my father, a lawyer, William Patterson Allen. Of that union three girls, were born-Rosemary, I and then Dollie. The house was now bulging with people and lots of activity.

Ota was a teacher to the boys: taught them at an early age how to make hunting spears, how to hunt, and how to fish as he was taught to do by his father. He was also teacher to our mother and to the Harlem Renaissance poets and writers, such as Dubois and James Weldon Johnson who visited Anne Spencer and the Hayes home. They too, were interested and joined the Pan-African movement; a movement uniting those persons of African descent from around the world.

Fwela returned Ota to his Forest, but brought him back over here again. Fwela deserted him and Ota ended up exhibited in a cage with an ape in the Bronx Park Zoo. Protests were loud and wide. My mother's first husband, Professor Hayes (ex-slave who had known abuses), offered Ota a home with him in Lynchburg, Virginia, and schooling at the seminary across the road where Hayes was President. One of the poems is an account of that. Ota never expressed it, but he naturally longed for his home in the Forest. I have never understood why the persons of Lynchburg, Virginia could not find a way to send Ota to his beloved Forest in the Congo.

When Professor Hayes died, Ota returned to the Orphanage, and in 1910 Ota requested a return to the Hayes home in Virginia. By this time, Mary Hayes was now Mars Hayes Allen having married my father, William Allen, lawyer. Ota settled in, but in his soul, longed to return to his Forest home. The boys last time in the woods with Ota, he sang a very sorrowful song. His stories speak of this. He sings a soulful song, "I Belong in Forest." Then Ota went into the woods alone singing a song he had heard the Chapel choir at Virginia Seminary sing:

*I believe I'll go back home,  
Lordy, won't you help me.*

Ota ended up saying, "I'll find a way." He does a fire dance, which I learned from an African student at the University of South Carolina, that in some African cultures, was a preparation for death. In the dark of night, Ota went into a shed and shot himself. My brother Hunter remembered this well, and when telling me the story, tears were in his eyes as Ota was like a father to him.

I'm not certain Rosemary, Dolly and I remember too much about Ota; we were so young. However, both Rosemary and I seem to have vague visions of him. Our brother, Hunter, who just died in 2003, through the years told us many stories about Ota whom we called "Otto," the name that came down in a letter from the orphanage. Hunter said of Ota, "He was like a father to me, my friend, my teacher, my hero, who knew more about the meaning of humanity than the missionary who brought him over here." And indeed he did; his people of the Congo Forest were pacifists, equalitarians, and environmentalists. We could learn much from them. There is such beauty in the culture of the early deep African Congo Forest People we want to know more about them. Perhaps their music will take us there. They sang through their day's work and when celebrating at night. The beginning poem speaks to this lovely culture where music every day was so much a part of their lives.

**PRELUDE**  
**(The Early Deep African Congo Forest)**  
**Music of the Forest**  
**1. Morning**

The early Deep Congo Forest People  
awaken singing, dancing,

welcoming a new day, their Forest  
a rugged, but peaceful home,

wrapping itself around them softly,  
their lives, harmonious.

In the trees, a choir of birds  
join them, singing.

*Cheer-weet, cheer-weet, cheer-weet:*  
elephants in the distance

stomp dancing through the Forest,  
trumpeting their own *cool*.

A gazelle, startled, jetés over a log,  
then dances off into the brush

while monkeys chide her with their  
oo-oo; ah-ah; oo-oo; ah-ah;

as the peace-loving Congo Forest  
People go about their work

filling their days with song – the  
custom brought over the waters

in the bosoms of slaves to the rice and  
cotton fields of South Carolina;

pickin' cotton and singin', plantin' rice and  
singin', singin' way into the night;

celebratin' life - threads comin' over  
the waters from their

homeland, took us a long time  
to tie the threads together.

## 2. Night

In Ota's Forest, night, a festive time;  
members of his camp sitting  
around a communal campfire in the  
center of their circled huts,  
sharing almost everything, softening  
the harshness of life in Forest;  
the men weaving stories of the hunt –  
singing:

*Elephant, elephant, here we come-  
Spear in hand, silent our drum.*

Ota's father (the hunter), his friend Moko  
(the elephant), they dance.

As hunter slays elephant, loud cheers  
from camp-singing

*Elephant hunter, take your bow,  
Elephant hunter, take your bow.*<sup>6</sup>

On stage, Ota's father proudly  
makes sweeping bows;  
members of camp cheering the  
prowess of a great hunter.

A chorus of mothers sitting outside  
their huts, rocking their  
babies, singing a lullaby accompanied  
by the soft clicking sound of

nbengo sticks-

*My sweet baby, go to sleep,  
go to sleep, my baby.  
Yah, yah; yah, yah, yah.  
When you wake,  
we'll have sweets.  
Go to sleep, my baby.*<sup>7</sup>

At evening's end, an elder tells  
stories of their ancestors,  
heirlooms passed down from  
generation to generation.  
Palm wine poured on the ground -  
libation to their ancestors.

*Father of my father's father,  
we sing a song for you;*

*Praise Forest for food,  
praise Forest for huts,  
praise Forest for clothes,  
praise Forest for love,  
praise Forest for life.*

## CHAPTER II

### OTA'S EARLY LIFE

#### 1. Life in the Congo Forest

Ota born in 1883 in the deep, deep  
Congo Forest,  
where men hunt big elephant, big antelope -  
providing food for families;

where fathers teach sons early how to fish  
how to hunt;

where in the hot Forest thick trees cool  
the breeze;

where they shut out the world for years-the  
Forest a safe cocoon for them:

Where beautiful flowers grow -hazy blue  
lobelia, rose-colored bougainvillea,  
  
sometimes worn in women's hair.  
sometimes just to smile on passim!:

Where the Forest People dance for Forest.  
sing for Forest, their giver of life.

Ota and his people get up and dance  
around the fire,  
faster, faster, faster, praising  
Forest for its gifts.

## 2. Fathers of the Congo

### 3.

(Ota telling Hayes Boys about Fathers)

Like big tree teach little tree to grow,  
like big bird teach little bird to

fly, like big cheetah teach little cheetah  
to run, Fathers teach us everything

about Forest. Fathers, they wise, they know  
everything. Hush. Hush, listen to Forest.

When I young boy, real young boy, Father  
teach me to fish, to hunt. When I here

before, I teach Gregory. He sitting next  
to me like he my son. He's only

six then, but he do good. I say shave wood  
'til tip real sharp; we makin' arrow.

I show him how to hold a knife so he don't  
cut himself - he do good. Together

we make arrow and we make a short spear  
We hunt with spear. We share arrow

so sharp, don't need no arrowhead like here  
In my home, all Fathers sit around fire

with their sons. We sing, laugh, have a good  
time and our sons learning all the

time. Fathers. they wise, say Forest talk  
to you. Hush, hush, listen to Forest.

After finishing his story or his Forest home,  
Ota sings a song to his Forest.

*Forest, Forest, giver of life,  
I'm born to you, I'm part of you.  
Forest, Forest, give of food,  
of clothes, of home,  
I bow to you*

## Red Rubber

Throughout the time Ota was in the home with my brothers, he taught them how to respect and to get along with people as was true of his beautiful culture for thousands of years or until the invasion of their Deep Forest for rubber after the invention of the automobile. This was a period of horror for the gentle "Pygmies" as evidenced in the next poem "Red Rubber," as Edward Dene Morel called it because of the deaths of so many gentle men of the Congo Forest; the automobile producers throughout the world demanding rubber - killing the Forest People not working fast enough for rubber.

### I. Storm Warning

(1890)

There is a horror story that needs to be  
told to understand what happened

to the peaceful life in the Congo Forest –  
the story of<sup>8</sup> **RED RUBBER!**

High winds gusting through Congo Forest –  
*rubber, rubber, rubber* for the booming

automobile industry; rubber that in 1890,  
John Dunlop, veterinary surgeon in

Ireland, working on his young son's tricycle,  
discovered would give smoother rides<sup>9</sup>.

This just about the time of the automobile,  
and with it the horrors in the

Congo, collecting *rubber, rubber, rubber*,  
all sanctioned by Leopold, II

of Belgium, ruler of the Congo Free State.  
*Rubber, rubber, rubber!*

Rubber, Edward Dene Morel, shipping clerk,  
called "Red Rubber." Sent into the

Congo forest, he witnessed the killing of  
slow rubber workers. He saw

cut-off hands of workers rebelling against  
their treatment. He saw blood of

Congo workers on vines around rubber  
trees. He learned they received

no money for their work -  
called it "slavery."

## The Anthropologists

Another period of disruption in the peaceful Congo Forest was the coming of the anthropologists going round the world gathering people they considered the "lower forms of man." They gathered Eskimos from Alaska, Igorots from the Philippines, the Ainu from Japan, Indian tribes from North and South America, Zulus, Balubas and "Pygmies" from Africa. Samuel Philips Verner, American missionary in Africa, found Ota Benga the "Pygmy" from the Congo. Ota Benga was intelligent, kind and had superior human qualities that the missionary, Verner, did not possess. Ota was brought by Verner to America to be exhibited as a "lower form of man" in the 1904 World's Fair as were all of the others mentioned above.

My poem is the story of what happened to Ota Benga, the intelligent, kind and loving person who ended up in the home of my mother's first husband, Professor Hayes after he and others got him out of the monkey cage in the zoo. The anthropologists of the day, were asking such questions as: "Were dark-skinned people capable of discerning the color blue?" My answer to that is in the next poem, "Blues Man Answers the Anthropologists."

Dr R S. Woodworth, Professor Starr  
and other early, anthropologists  
focused on the following question:  
*Were dark-skinned people capable  
Of discerning the color blue?*<sup>11</sup>

## BLUES MAN ANSWERS THE ANTHROPOLOGISTS

Man, we know blues, from azure of a  
clear blue sky to indigo of the  
darkest night.

Taken from the silver blue of the Kasai  
and Congo, crossed the deep blue  
in hulls of slave ships; we know the blues, Man.

Worked hard laboring cobalt blue,  
danced, laughed and made love  
in the midnight blue,

wrote the blues, sang the blues,  
played the blues, lived the blues, so  
ask another question, Man,

'cause I thought you already knew  
we know the blues,  
all hues of the blues, Man

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<sup>1</sup> From *Ota Benga, The Pygmy in the Zoo* by Bradford and Blume.

## TIES TO THE MOTHERLAND

### STRINGS III

#### VIRGINIA

(A Little Background Music)

It was not surprising that Professor Hayes  
(My mothers first husband)  
offered Ota a home and education

in Lynchburg, Virginia. He had great  
respect for Africans, encouraged

a number of them to attend Virginia  
Seminary. Outstanding among them,

John Chilembwe, student from Nyasaland.  
How alike they were –

Hayes and Chilembwe - two militant  
fighters for equality and justice.

#### GREGORY WILLIS HAYES

Gregory-Willis Hayes, former slave boy, rose

to graduate with honors from Oberlin college in 1888,  
to be the first Black class orator there,  
to become President of Virginia Seminary at age twenty-nine,  
to wrest the Black-founded school from under the rule of  
the white American Baptist Home Mission Society,  
to offer his students a strong liberal Arts education,  
to join Chilembwe in his Pan-African plan.

#### JOHN CHILEMBWE

John Chilembwe, former student of Professor Hayes rose  
to graduate from Virginia Seminary in 1898,  
to later gather people from the African Diaspora,  
to organize an African Development Plan,  
to involve Professor Hayes in the plan,  
to serve as African representative for the Lynchburg branch  
at the same time Professor Hayes was President and  
Mary Hayes, the treasurer,  
to lead the successful revolt against British

## Ota in the Hayes' Home

Professor Hayes died shortly after Ota came to the Hayes' home. Professor Hayes' wife spent much time with Ota. My brother, Hunter, speaks affectionately of Ota who became his father figure. Hunter, who, even when he was in his 90's, would tear when speaking of Ota. The following poem is one of many sessions in the woods with Ota where Ota taught them how to fish, and to hunt as he did his own son.

### CHAPTER I

## NIGHT BIRDS I

### Early Evening

Dusk, the chill of autumn in the air, like  
night birds, they find their early  
evening place in the woods - Ota holding  
young Hunter's hand, Wilelbert,  
and Gregory close behind. Ota singing  
his praise song to Forest:

*The Forest is good;*

*The Forest is good.*

The voices of the boys join Ota in singing  
along with the sounds of evening -  
*last who-it, who-it* of red birds; the end of  
day tolling of college chapel bells.  
Man of the Forest, Ota maneuvers dense  
passages, picks up Hunter, jumps  
over fallen tree limbs; clumsy boys, fish  
out of water. They come to a  
clearing where it's evident Ota has spent  
many evenings. Like ancient fires  
of his ancestors, vestiges of old ashes tell  
stories, stories of his special times  
in the woods alone, trying to find a likeness  
of home. *Come, come*, he says, his  
smile as broad as the Kasai river, his  
command firm yet gentle,  
*Go gather dry branches for the fire.*

The boys obey Ota. Hunter,  
with a few branches, asks the story  
teller, *That enough, Otto?*

*Yah, good*, Ota responds patting Hunter  
on the head. A big smile from  
Hunter. The other boys bring Ota arms full  
of branches. Ota smiles, *Good, good.*  
Ota builds a fire, singing as he does with  
almost every activity; light from

the fire reflecting the Motherland in his  
smooth mahogany skin. Gregory,  
across from him, seems born of the same  
tree. Like a mother hen, Ota keeps  
young Hunter close to him, threads of his  
land where the care of young  
children belongs to all. The boys sit now,  
wide-eyed, listening to Ota's  
stories as they would do many times.

After Ota finishes his story  
of his Forest home, soulfully he  
sings a song to his Forest.

*Forest, Forest,  
giver of life,  
I'm born to you;  
I'm part of you.  
Forest, Forest,  
giver of food,  
giver of home.  
I bow to you.*

Ota says, *Getting late; we go home now.* They  
leave the woods singing with Ota:

*The Forest is good;  
The Forest is good.*

All the way back to the house, their old  
faithful dog, Buster, following them.  
Ota spent many days in the woods with  
the boys, but his desire to return  
to his Congo Forest was very strong  
Ota became very depressed.

One evening the boys saw Ota dancing  
around the fire, faster, faster, faster.  
They did not know at the time this was a  
dance in preparation for death. Ota,  
despondent one evening, went into the  
woods and shot himself.

When the boys and people from the  
college heard of this, there was  
great sadness and crying as Ota was  
much beloved there.

*Man eats and sleeps  
It is the great cold  
It is the great cold of the night  
It is the dark  
-Gabon Pygmy Death Song*

**STRINGS VI**  
**The Great Cold**  
**Homegoing**  
(Triste)

All time has turned to night, the woods empty  
now. Night Birds silenced, March air cold.

In the Chapel, the Homecoming service, the choir  
is singing the mournful:

*Swing how, sweet chariot  
coming for to carry me home.  
Swing low, sweet chariot  
coming for to carry me home.*

*I looked over Jordan  
And what did I see-ee  
Coming for to carry me home?  
A band of angels coming after me,  
Coming for to carry me home.*

Did his spirit hear this and wonder? Mama  
spoke of Ota's gentle ways, the love

of the boys for him. how much they learned  
of the land of our ancestors, the

blessing it was for them. Two teachers at  
the Seminary lower school spoke

of Ota's intelligence, his love of nature,  
his giving and loving ways.

The pastor delivering the sermon, spoke also  
of his loving and giving ways. His

intelligence, his love of nature, his presence –  
*a gift to us.* The service over,

the boys go up to view their friend one last  
time. Then *People Funeral Home*

rolls his body down the aisle,  
the pastor reciting:

*In my Father's house are  
many mansions. If it were  
not so, I would have told you.*

*I go to prepare a place for you.*

*Peoples Funeral Home* takes his body for  
Burial to the Old Methodist Cemetery

(Now the old City Cemetery). At the grave  
site the pastor recites:

*The Lord is my shepherd,  
I shall not want ...<sup>58</sup>*

And they lower Ota into the grave: then  
slowly and silently, walk away.

## **Lamentations**

*The* - Night Birds sing sorrow songs.  
*Joy* - *is* no more, they walk  
*in* - the woods alone, singing,  
*our* - hero has gone away, our  
*hearts* - are sad. No one  
*has* - told us why our nights of fires  
*ceased;* - no more days of the hunt with  
*our* - friend, no more nights of the  
*dance* - with the moon. Our teacher  
*has* - closed his books and  
*turned* - our dance  
*to*  
*mourning.\**

\*Lamentations 5:15; King James

## **AN EVENING SONG FOR OTA**

If I could have gone into some quiet corner of your Forest,  
waited for the soft dulcet sound of wagtails,  
Would I have found your spirit there, the embers of a  
once bright fire still burning?  
Would I have sensed a gathering of your ancestors  
surrounding you, welcoming you home?  
Would I have heard the trumpeting of elephants, or  
seen you dancing once again with your moon?  
How beloved you were to those who knew you here; to my  
brothers. you were the bearer of the wisdom of our ancestors.  
We know the pull of the ocean eastward was much stronger  
than any bond to the west. You gave us much more  
than we could ever give to you.  
Good night beloved friend and teacher.  
Good night, kind leader of the hunt.  
Good night, gentle story teller.  
I pray your soul is at peace.  
Good night, Ota.