

Ota Benga's Life in Africa, Capture, and Journey to America
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Abstract

This is a putative history of a friendship between an African native and an eccentric American explorer who both seemed to have needs and ambitions that propelled them into a tragic odyssey of exploration during the early 20th century. Ota Benga was a native of a tribe of African forest people known as the Bachichiri living along the Kasai River in the Congo Free State. The explorer, Samuel Phillips Verner, the grandfather of the present author and speaker, had procured Ota Benga from bondage and took him with other African natives to participate in the exhibition of native peoples at the St. Louis World's Fair in 1904. This history covers their experiences at the World's Fair, subsequent explorations in America and Africa, and return to New York City in 1906, where Ota Benga became the "Pygmy in the Zoo" serving as a demonstration of human evolution through his role as a representative of a tribe of native Africans who were regarded as a "missing link". Unfortunately, no one can truly examine the thoughts and feelings of Ota Benga, since he left no account of his own and all that can be ascertained must be distilled from Verner's accounts and those of news reporters and a few others who participated in, and shaped his odyssey.

Background on Verner.

Samuel Phillips Verner was variously an ill-prepared missionary, an experienced Carolina woodsman and explorer in central Africa, and a would-be entrepreneur and empire-builder. As a scion of a well-connected southern family, whose fortunes and ambitions were struggling to recover from the devastation of the American Civil War, Verner was the eldest of his siblings, all of whom were raised in a family that had high expectations for their success.

Verner was challenged to understand the nature of African-Americans by his parents. His father, John Samuel Verner, the Solicitor General of South Carolina during the restoration period, was an avowed racist who had little regard for the abilities of African-Americans in local government and wanted to wrest the control of local government from the Yankee "carpet baggers" who had been in control. Verner's mother, on the other hand, was of a mind that felt that African-Americans could indeed be a source of strength for reconstruction and that the strongest priority should be given to extending education to African-Americans so that they could fully participate in the growth of the new South. In her view, all people would benefit from their inclusion in the reconstruction of the South. The discussions around the Verner dinner table in Columbia, South Carolina, were filled with debate about the comparative inherent intellect of African descent people, and doubtlessly young Verner was motivated to find the truth of the matter.

After scoring the highest academic achievement, perhaps in its the entire history, at the College of South Carolina, Verner felt a calling to resolve the racist questions that his parents posed. During and after college he began to study everything from the Holy Bible to Charles Darwin's "On the Origin of Species" and "The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex" where he read that if there were to be found any transitional species of hominid between the great apes and

humans, it would surely be found in Africa, where all humans are believed to have originated. Verner became obsessed with the idea of pursuing anthropology by exploring in what was then known as the “dark continent”.

But, how would Verner obtain the funds and wherewithal to explore the great “dark continent” ? He felt he had the wherewithal to meet the physical challenges, since he was raised as an outdoorsman in the Carolina back-country, with a deep knowledge of the wild mountain streams and survival skills to live off of the rugged landscape. He was very capable at fishing and hunting, and finding his way through the thick undergrowth of the Smoky Mountain area. While on his way to Africa, he prepared himself in London. He had the common sense to meet with Dr. Patrick Manson, whom he described as “The most experienced and widely reputed specialist on tropical diseases in the world”¹, who instructed him on the use of mosquito netting to avoid insect bites. This knowledge, incidentally, Verner passed on to Dr. Walter Reed in his work in the Panama Canal Zone in later years. Verner attributed his longevity largely to the knowledge he gained from Dr. Manson.

The funding for his early African explorations came from the Southern Presbyterian Church, but he needed to be recognized as a legitimate ordained cleric to take advantage of this opportunity. Verner seized an opportunity to gain such recognition by enrolling in a theological school in Alabama that was owned by his uncle, whereupon he passed an exam and was ordained and graduated in three days. His graduation photo shows him with Rev. Phipps, his classmate who graduated with him after three years of study. Rev. Phipps was also attracted to go to Africa as a missionary for the church, and I am of the firm belief that Verner never had any serious intent to do missionary work, but needed the support of the church to pay his fare. Ultimately, Verner’s record of his first trip to Africa and work there during 1896-1899 was recorded in his extensive 500 page volume, “*Pioneering in Central Africa*”, which was published by the Presbyterian Committee on Publication in Richmond, 1901. This volume barely mentions any traditional missionary work, but rather is a collection of adventure stories and descriptions of native cultures. It helped establish Verner as a noted anthropologist and explorer, but must have been a disappointment to the Presbyterian authorities in that his missionary work as reported in this tome was minimal, whereas it seemed apparent that he was more interested in the cultural and scientific study of the African people.

Verner’s reputation as an African explorer was probably at its maximum in 1901-1903. He was among the founders of the American Anthropological Society, and as a result of his acknowledged expertise in African affairs in 1903, he was hired by the St. Louis Exposition to “acquire” certain African natives of the pygmy variety to be participants in the anthropology exhibit at the 1904 World’s Fair.

The story of Verner’s involvement with the St. Louis World’s Fair is well covered in the book which I wrote together with Harvey Blume in 1992, “*Ota Benga - The Pygmy in the Zoo*”, published by St. Martin’s Press². Our book focuses on Ota Benga, whom Verner did not meet until 1903 on his second African trip. A more complete discussion of Verner’s explorations and the collections that he amassed in his own name and others’ names for various museums in the

¹ “*Pioneering in Central Africa*”, page 10, by S. P. Verner, Presbyterian Committee of Publication, 1901

² A limited number of copies of the paperback edition of “*Ota Benga - The Pygmy in the Zoo*”, may be purchased at this conference, and it can also be obtained from the web site <http://www.otabenga.com> maintained by the author.

United States and Europe, may be found in an unpublished article that was written by Dr. Gordon D. Gibson of the Smithsonian Institution³. A copy of Gibson's article has been provided to the leadership of this conference, and has also been posted on the internet site for Ota Benga. It should be noted that the material covered in the Gibson article does not include any mention of Ota Benga because it covers the time before Verner met Ota Benga.

Verner meets Ota Benga.

Verner had signed up with the St. Louis Exposition as an agent to go to Africa and procure pygmies for the anthropology exhibit at the World's Fair. There was a formal contract that specified what was expected of Verner and what he would be paid. Also, the provisions that would be provided to Verner were spelled out in detail. These provisions included an allowance for "gift" items that might be needed to help persuade tribal chieftains to allow people under their rule permissions to accept offers to go to the Exposition.

During his excursion into the Congo, his riverboat had an engine failure that required nearly three weeks for the delivery of parts to repair it. During this time the passengers were warned not to wander far from the safety of the boat because there might be dangerous animals in the area, and Verner stated that they were warned of the presence of "cannibals" living nearby. This delay had caused the press in St. Louis to speculate on whether Verner was ambushed and eaten by cannibals, and therefore would not be able to deliver on his contract. Verner insisted on using this time to explore in the area, despite the threat of cannibals, and after consulting with a Belgian official who knew the area made a call on a native village where Ota Benga, along with other natives were being held as hostages. There had been a war over some delivery of ivory, which resulted in the destruction of Ota's tribe and their homes. Ota's wife and children had been captured and possibly murdered along with all the natives in his village by natives loyal to the dreaded Force Publique, which was the enforcement arm of King Leopold in the Congo. The exact circumstances of the dispute that led to the massacre of Ota's village and family are not known, but it probably arose from a failure to deliver some promised quota of elephant tusks. Pygmies were often suspected of hiding their stores of elephant tusks so the tusks would not be confiscated by other tribesmen or agents of King Leopold.

There are many renditions of how they met, some with overtones of sensationalism and others with greatly exaggerated claims of bravado or abuse. Perhaps the most truthful report is that of the New York Zoological Society⁴ which stated as follows:

"In 1904 he was found by Mr. Verner on one of the southern tributaries of the Congo, a captive in the hands of a tribe of cannibalistic savages known as the Baschilde. The exact locality was the confluence of the Kasai and Sankmir Rivers, Upper Congo. Knowing that this tribe sometimes sacrifices their slaves, and sometimes eats them, Mr. Verner, prompted solely by the instincts of humanity ransomed Ota Benga and attempted to convey him back to his own country."

³ "*Samuel Phillips Verner in the Kasai*", by Gordon D. Gibson, Curator of African Ethnology, Smithsonian Institution, Washington D.C. An unpublished article originally intended for publication in *Natural History*, the magazine of the American Museum of Natural History in New York City.

⁴ *Zoological Society Bulletin*, No. 23, October 1906, pages 301 & 302, published by the New York Zoological Society. This article, entitled "An African Pigmy" described Ota Benga as being "employed" in the Zoological Park.

As a respected scientific journal published by the Zoo, the bulletin in which this description was offered was prepared by experts who would likely have consulted with Verner and Verner would have likely given a truthful account, although Verner was known to have embellished the truth in many of his interviews with the popular press.

After being freed from his captors, Ota Benga accompanied Verner on his quest to obtain a group of pygmies to take to the St. Louis World's Fair for exhibition purposes. There is no credible evidence that Ota Benga was not very grateful for being freed from his captors and the two men formed a long-lasting and mutually beneficial friendship that became an odyssey of exploration, adventure, and learning.

Ota Benga, the Explorer.

Ota Benga was an experienced elephant hunter and expert in the making of hammocks and nets for trapping game. With Verner as his guide, Ota Benga began his own exploration of the world through which they traveled. Ota may have been especially instrumental in persuading other Africans to join them in their trip to St. Louis and he would have known where some of the more venturesome pygmies could be found. Verner exposed Ota Benga to some of the accoutrements of modern western civilization, such as the Edison phonograph, steamboats, pocket watches, photography, guns, and electricity. Once in America, they would have seen balloons, automobiles, railroads, and a few airplanes, especially at the World's Fair.

Ota did not keep any written journal of his experiences. Aside from press accounts of his travels, the only records of their adventures were kept by Verner, and many of them have been lost. Ota and Verner always journeyed together in America. Verner knew enough of Ota's language to converse with him and translate for him. They arrived in New Orleans in the early summer of 1904, but Verner had contracted a malarial seizure and could not follow through with a planned visit and reception with the Mayor. The Africans were placed on a train to St. Louis by an Exposition official, who came to greet them and escort them to the World's Fair grounds. Verner wrote that the Exposition official was not able to communicate with the Africans and acted coldly and rudely towards them. Verner concluded that he would have to commit most of his time to the Africans' needs while they were in America and after his recovery from the seizure, he went to the Fair and began to try and make many corrections in their accommodations and accompanied them in sight-seeing and presentations. After the Fair had ended in the fall of 1904, Ota and Verner traveled by rail to Washington D.C. , Baltimore, and to Verner's family home in western North Carolina while awaiting the return trip to Africa via New Orleans, Havana, and Tenerife. Some of the Africans became ill in New Orleans during the Mardi Gras of 1905 but Ota Benga was able to enjoy the celebrations and participate in the liberties afforded by the occasion. All of the Africans returned safely to the African homelands. Some of their illnesses were successfully treated while in Havana. Verner took great pride in the fact that he was able to return all of the Africans safely and in good health, for unfortunately, that was not the case for some of the natives of the Philippines, South American Indians, and the Zulus from South Africa. In fact some of the Zulu never returned, and found themselves among the homeless poor of St. Louis.

Once in Africa, Ota and Verner began a series of explorations there, where now, Ota was the guide and translator. They made many presentations to local natives about the wonders of the western world and even set up a local fair where Verner was exhibited on a make-shift southern style veranda, smoking a corn-cob pipe, wearing a straw hat while listening to the music of

Johann Strauss, Jr. and John Philip Sousa on an Edison phonograph. During this period in 1905, Verner became acquainted with Frederick Starr and Leo Frobenius, well-known anthropologists, with whom he shared his amenities at Camp Washington. Camp Washington, named for Booker T. Washington, was a training camp for Africans to learn manual arts and crafts using western technologies to prepare them for work in the Belgian industries.

Many of the items in the collections of African artifacts now displayed in museums around the world attributed to Starr and Frobenius, were actually purchased from Verner and Ota Benga, who had originally collected them.

Some of the adventures of Ota Benga and Verner were recalled by Verner in a series of articles that he wrote for the Brevard (NC) Daily News during the 1930s. Ota Benga learned, from Verner, how to use gunpowder as an explosive to kill a meddlesome crocodile that had eaten Ota's pet dog. Verner had learned, from Ota, how to fend off a leopard, and how to safely avoid encounters with biting ants in the forests of the Congo. Their explorations also resulted in the discovery of an important diamond mine and other natural resources.

Many of these stories published in the Brevard Daily News, such as those entitled: "The Enchanted Hippo", "The Wild Boar", "The Buffalo Bullfight", "Canning the Crocodile", and "Attack by the Lupumbo" seemed so fantastic that many thought they were pure fiction, but Verner insisted that they were true, and Ota Benga was often a principal character.

Ota Benga remarried a woman of the Twa tribe during this adventuresome period, but after she was bitten by a poisonous snake and died, the Batwa never fully accepted him into their tribe. The snake bite was considered as some kind of omen of evil-doing, which had the effect of disenfranchising Ota Benga once again from his origins.

Verner and Ota had amassed a large collection of African cultural artifacts and mineralogical samples, and botanical and biological specimens (including many live animals), intended for American and European museums. As Verner was packing up to return to America, Ota insisted that he should be allowed to come along, since he perceived that he no longer had a future in Africa. So, along with a boat-load of more than 50 crates and barrels of collectibles, Verner and Ota crossed the Atlantic once again, this time destined for New York City.

Once in New York, the American Museum of Natural History, which Verner thought would be interested in his artifacts, declined any interest, preferring to acquire American Indian items, and Verner became insolvent. In a vain attempt to borrow from his family in the Carolinas, Verner left Ota Benga in the custody of Herman Bumpus, Director of the Museum, while Verner traveled south to learn that his unappreciative family had no interest in funding his African adventures. Bumpus seized an opportunity to employ Ota Benga in his fund-raising efforts, where he was both at times encouraged, and at other times discouraged, from performing various "antics" to amuse the museum's wealthy patrons. Ota Benga lived at the museum in an apartment that the museum provided, on its premises, for distinguished guests.

Bumpus, frustrated with his inability to control Ota's antics, and unable to communicate with Ota except through Verner's transliterated letters, found a way to dispatch his responsibility by inviting Dr. William Hornaday to consider "employing" Ota Benga at the Bronx Zoo. Hornaday saw an opportunity to present Ota Benga as an exhibition of Darwin's Theory of Evolution by suggesting that Ota was one of a tribe of pygmies that might be regarded as a "missing link" in the pathway of evolution from anthropoid apes to humans. So Ota Benga became the "Pygmy in the Zoo".

Although Ota, at times, seemed to enjoy his role as an exhibition celebrity, he was also taunted by ill-mannered visitors and could become frustrated to the point of violence at times. He once speared a visitor in his leg with a well placed arrow from his bow, and fought with caretakers who did not want him to shed his clothing entirely. Although he was given many liberties to roam about the zoo grounds, sporting a fine white linen suit, and actually spent the nights in an apartment at the zoo which was intended for distinguished visitors, the staged scenes in the primate cage were what captivated the public and the press' image of him.

When Verner returned to New York, he had to find a job to restore his fiscal integrity, so he brandished a letter of reference from a cabinet secretary in Washington to get a job as a ticket clerk in the Wall Street IRT Subway Station, which had just been opened for operation in 1906. By this time, an effort had been mounted by various well-meaning individuals to "rescue" Ota Benga from the zoo, deny Verner, Bumpus or Hornaday any role as Ota's custodian, and Ota's odyssey took a different turn. He became a resident of the Howard Colored Orphan Asylum in Brooklyn.

Despite some press reports to the contrary, Verner was denied any opportunity to visit with Ota Benga and was prevented from seeing him ever again. Verner met with New York capitalists and returned to Africa as the head of the American Congo Company, wishing that Ota Benga could be at his side. The American Congo Company had a license from King Leopold to develop American industrial interests in the Congo, which lasted until the Belgian Parliament removed Leopold's authority in 1908, and the American Congo Company was dissolved. Verner, again seeking employment, took a job as a health officer in the Panama Canal Zone.

Ota's experience at the Asylum and later at the Virginia Seminary are the subject of other presentations at this symposium, and so I will leave Ota's subsequent odyssey in their hands.

Ota Benga as an entertainer.

While it seems to be popular today for people to study Ota Benga's life as a victim of repression and racism, he did have a life. One of his talents was that of an entertainer. He could demonstrate and play the *molimo*, a native instrument that was used in ceremonies to celebrate a successful elephant kill. He brought his molimo to the World's Fair and enjoyed dancing to the piano music of Scott Joplin on St. Louis Plaza. He was also a lead performer in frequent skits that were intended to illustrate the life of his fellow Africans.

While celebrating his success in killing the "Madame" crocodile that ate his pet dog, under the mantle of the crocodile's severed head, Ota Benga performed a dance so alluring that Verner claimed he did not have the language skill to describe it. To quote Verner on Ota Benga's "Crocodile Dance":⁵

"There is no use trying to describe it -- how often have I wished that O'Henry, or Mark Twain, or Dumas could have stood in my shoes sometimes to leave behind a really immortal record of what used to pass under my eyes."

⁵ *The Crocodile Dance*, part of a series of articles published by the Brevard (NC) Daily News during the 1930s based on the adventures of S. P. Verner while exploring with Ota Benga in the Congo forests.

S. P. Verner

Verner also exploited an opportunity to go on lecture tours about Africa with Ota Benga. Their agent for arranging such tours was previously an agent for P.T. Barnum, and the manner in which these tours were conducted was closer to what might have been regarded as a “freak show” than an academic learning exercise. Verner may have delivered the lectures but Ota was the star of the show, with his antics. Part of what many see as “antics” in the behavior of the forest people may be, in fact, a cultural tendency to communicate with the art of “attention getting” through certain behaviors that are closer to entertainment, than disruptive social acts.

Another aspect of entertainment that Ota Benga enjoyed was demonstrating the art of weaving, particularly in making hats. On a few occasions, Ota would be wearing only a hat of his own design, and nothing else, much to the amusement of visitors. He was skilled at the art of the “cats cradle” where complex woven patterns were produced in strings of yarn with clever manipulations of his fingers. He also could make his own bow and arrows and enjoyed demonstrating them to audiences in St. Louis and New York.

Ota Benga as a Diplomat and Statesman.

Ota Benga as an icon of racism, Barnumism, and Darwinism, was also keen to grasp an opportunity to use his talents to represent the needs and aspirations of his native people. At St. Louis, he was engaged in acting out a series of skits depicting the methods by which his tribe was being treated. He showed how people were murdered and he presented pleas for help from Americans to save his people from further degradation. Unfortunately, few of the Fair officials and visitors were interested in such pleas. They only wanted to have some fun seeing Ota Benga and his fellow Africans throw mud balls at the American Indians and other natives, climb trees, act like monkeys, and mimic their observers. Verner did provide Ota with some private audiences among prominent people who were concerned about human atrocities in the Congo, such as Cardinal Gibbons of Baltimore, and Kermit Roosevelt. Ota’s principal strengths as a statesman and diplomat were best seen in his negotiations with other African natives where he played a leadership role in facilitating cooperation and organizing various gatherings.

Summation:

Since Ota Benga cannot speak for himself, it is misleading and possibly dangerous for any of us to put words in his mouth. We cannot see inside his head. However, a careful reading of the press clippings and study of the characters and tenor of the times in which he lived, shows me that he was a complex character. He was not *just* a victim of racism, Barnumism, and Darwinism. He was a multi-dimensional character who could make choices and could be influential. In his passing, we can all learn that we need to try harder, when offering our best intentions, to avoid unintended consequences that we could later regret.

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