

# William Temple Hornaday

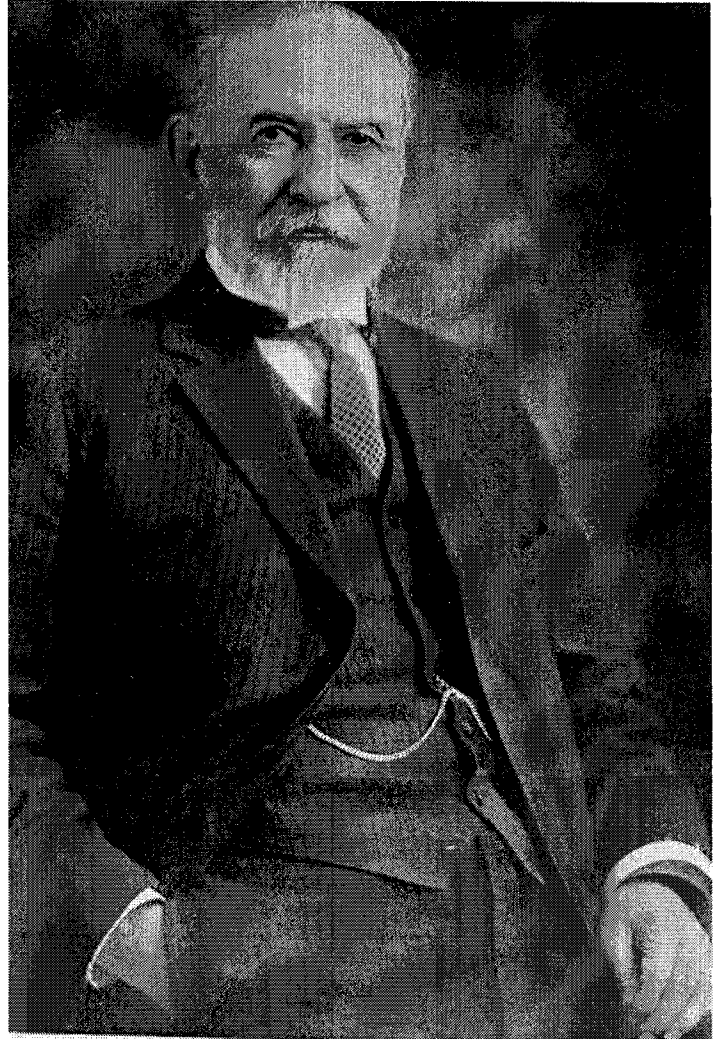
(1854 – 1937)

Pioneer American Zoologist and Wildlife Conservationist  
Avon Native

William Temple Hornaday, one of America's most important pioneers of zoology and wildlife conservation, was born on December 1, 1854, on a farm that today is just outside Avon, Indiana in Washington Township. Although standard biographies always cite his birthplace as in or near Plainfield, Indiana, the farm his father (also named William Temple) owned straddled "Rockville Turnpike", Old US 36, ¼ mile west of present day Washington Township Community Park. This farm was located 2 miles north of the original Hornaday homestead established by William Jr.'s grandfather Ezekiel Hornaday in the White Lick Creek valley on Vestal Road, and about 4 miles northwest of Plainfield, the nearest significant town at the time of William Jr.'s birth.

William Sr., with his second wife Martha Varner Miller Hornaday (our subject's mother), their extended family, and others from the Hornaday clan, emigrated to southern Iowa in 1856 in search of better agricultural opportunities. Although William Jr. thus grew up mostly in Iowa, the deaths of his mother when he was 11 years old and his father 3 years later resulted in his returning to Indiana for extended periods to stay with his Varner / Miller and Hornaday relatives.

Early on William was drawn more to the colorfulness of native wildlife than to the dreariness of routine farm work, and no doubt spent many pleasurable hours haunting the valleys of White Lick Creek and Eagle Creek. It was during one of his stays with his Miller kin near Clermont that he happened one day to visit a gun and tackle shop in Indianapolis where he saw for the first time some mounted ducks. The idea that animals could be preserved to be studied and enjoyed indefinitely, rather than simply consumed or wasted, captivated him. He returned to Iowa to pursue further education at Oskaloosa College and Iowa State Agricultural College at Ames, and actively sought opportunities to learn the art and science of taxidermy.



DR. WILLIAM T. HORNADAY

## *The Education of a Practical Zoologist*

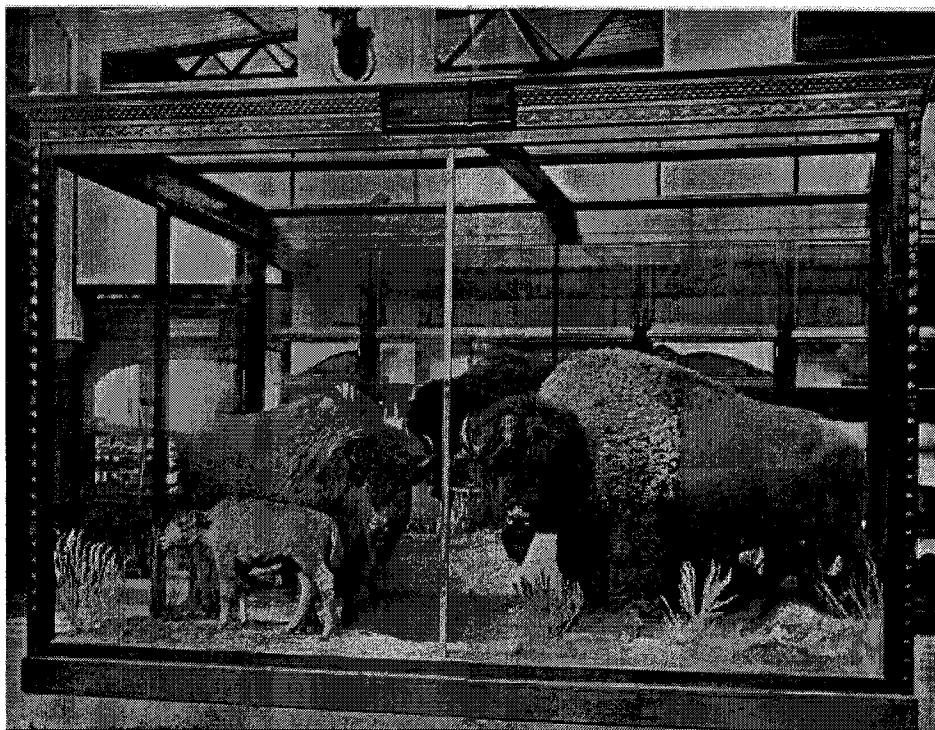
Before finishing his studies at Iowa State, Hornaday grasped an opportunity to work for one of the world's premier suppliers of mounted animal specimens for museums, Ward's Natural Science Establishment in Rochester, New York. After more than creditably fulfilling specimen collection assignments for Ward's first in Florida and Cuba, then in the West Indies and Venezuela in 1874 to 1876, he was rewarded with an important collecting assignment in Asia later in 1876. First taking an educational tour of major European institutions in

company with Professor Henry Ward himself, Hornaday embarked on his own from Egypt for a highly colorful and successful two-year trek of British Colonial India, Ceylon, the Malay Peninsula, and Borneo. Returning in 1879, he had amassed not only an impressive specimen harvest for the museums of the world, but also an incomparable self-education on the natural history of exotic animals and their environs, and even on obscure Asian ethnography. This sojourn inspired Hornaday to write his first book, *Two Years in the Jungle* (1885), a work which became one of the more widely read nature travelogues of the Nineteenth Century. The experience also planted the seeds of convictions in Hornaday which would eventually result in his revolutionizing taxidermic and zoological display, and in an impassioned advocacy of wildlife conservation.

### *The Smithsonian*

Before Hornaday, taxidermy typically involved the unnatural stuffing and static posing of animal skins. From his practical field experience, Hornaday recognized that this gave a false and uninteresting impression of how the animals were in real life. He laboriously refined new techniques to present specimens in a much more naturalistic way, posed as they would be seen in real life in a natural setting. Immediately upon his return from Asia, he applied these new techniques to a dynamic display of a group of orangutans fighting in jungle treetops. The display and Hornaday's accompanying paper were a sensation at the next annual meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science. This new attention spurred Hornaday to found the Society of American Taxidermists, and won him an appointment as chief taxidermist at the Smithsonian's National Museum in Washington, D.C.

Early in his tenure at the Smithsonian, Hornaday became aware that the native American bison (buffalo) were being decimated and might be headed for extinction. The National Museum lacked even one presentable specimen of this emblematic beast whose quick disappearance was universally regarded as inevitable.



**Hornaday Bison Group, Smithsonian, Washington, D.C., 1889**

Hornaday, with the backing of the director of the Smithsonian, resolved for purposes of historical documentation to try to secure several specimens. Keenly aware of the ambiguous morality of killing some of the last wild American bison for display purposes, Hornaday correctly judged that the attention his specimens drew in the nation's seat of power offered the best chance for sensitizing public and politician alike to the impending tragedy of their extinction. In late 1886 he located bison in a remote part of central Montana and took six animals to be sent back to Washington. The naturalistic display he created with these in 1888, along with his

seminal monograph on the bison's demise The Extermination of the American Bison (1889), were clarion calls to the nation about its imminent loss. It also prompted Hornaday to propose the establishment of a zoological park in the Nation's capital, part of whose purpose would be to initiate captive breeding programs for threatened animals such as the bison. This idea resulted in the creation of the Smithsonian's National Zoo in Washington, D.C., and eventually led to the establishment of federally protected bison ranges in the American West.

Hornaday's Smithsonian tenure also saw the development of a friendship with the young future President, Theodore Roosevelt. This became an association of significant mutual influence, spotlighted in a short character sketch of Hornaday in Douglas Brinkley's recent biography of Roosevelt, The Wilderness Warrior (2009).

The eventual survival and flourishing of the bison is a monument to Hornaday's work and advocacy, but so too is his iconic bison display itself. A central and popular feature at the Smithsonian from 1889 to 1957,

the mounted animals were returned to Montana, restored, and since 1996 have been on display at the Museum of the Northern Great Plains in Fort Benton, Montana, where they may be seen today.



**Hornaday Bison Group restored, 1996-present**  
**Museum of the Northern Great Plains, Fort Benton, Montana**  
photo courtesy of Museum of the Northern Great Plains, Fort Benton, MT

### *The New York Zoological Park*

A new head of the Smithsonian who insisted on personal authority over the developing National Zoo prompted Hornaday to resign in 1890. Moving, ironically, to Buffalo, New York, he engaged successfully in real estate. His zoological accomplishments were not, however, forgotten. In 1896 a group of influential New York citizens and businessmen, including Theodore Roosevelt, formed the New York Zoological Society, and prevailed upon William T. Hornaday to be the founding director of its new zoological park. Hornaday was given the responsibility of planning, developing and managing the new zoo virtually from scratch. He prepared by making a tour and detailed study of the zoos of Europe. Applying his extensive field experience and his convictions about the naturalistic display of wildlife, he developed the New York Zoological Park, better known as the Bronx Zoo, into what would generally be regarded for generations as the finest zoo in the world.

The directorship of the New York Zoological Park would be the capstone of Hornaday's career. He remained its head for 30 years. Constantly innovating with zoological presentation, Hornaday also became an impassioned advocate for the preservation of all types of wildlife in their native wild habitats. His course was not without controversy. In his zeal for verisimilitude of zoological display, he at least once made an ill-considered judgment of social insensitivity (the Ota Benga controversy of 1906) which unfortunately in some quarters has overshadowed his innocent intent and enormous contributions of good for wildlife preservation. His convictions evolved, as a direct result of his own experiences, into a truculent, passionate condemnation of all wanton killing of wildlife, often alienating sportsmen and gun interests. Hornaday, through his tireless writing and lobbying, became the forceful conscience behind the movement in the early Twentieth Century to legislatively enact hunting bag limits and prohibitions on hunting endangered species, or importing materials derived from them.

## *The Legacy*



**William T. Hornaday, 1920  
New York Zoological Park**

William T. Hornaday was a prolific writer. He authored over 20 books and hundreds of magazine and newspaper articles. His books range from nature travelogues (Two Years in the Jungle (1885), Campfires in the Canadian Rockies (1906), Campfires on Desert and Lava (1908), A Wild Animal Roundup (1925)) and popular natural history references (The American Natural History (1904, numerous subsequent editions including the famous 1914 4-volume "Fireside Edition"), The Minds and Manners of Wild Animals (1922), Tales from Nature's Wonderlands (1924), the nearly annual Popular Official Guide to the New York Zoological Park) to treatises on wildlife conservation (The Extinction of the American Bison (1889), Our Vanishing Wildlife (1913), Thirty Years War for Wild Life (1931)). In 1891 he published the authoritative manual on taxidermy, Taxidermy and Zoological Collecting. He even published some fiction (The Man Who Became a Savage (1896), Wild Animal Interviews (1928)), poetry (Old Fashioned Verses (1919)), and political commentary (Awake! America (1918)). Hornaday has been the subject of at least two detailed academic studies: James A. Dolph's "Bringing Wildlife to the Millions: William Temple Hornaday – The Early Years, 1854-1896" (PhD dissertation, University of Massachusetts, 1975), and Gregory J. Dehler's "An American Crusader: William Temple Hornaday and Wildlife Protection, 1840-1940 (PhD dissertation, Lehigh University, 2001).

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Though largely forgotten today, William Temple Hornaday was in his day a superb popularizer of animal life, and had enormous influence on the preservation of endangered wildlife and on America's developing conservation ethic. He particularly strove to interest youth in animals and conservation, and he had a strong early influence on the Scouting movement. In 1915 he created the Boy Scouts of America's Wildlife Protection Medal. After his death this annual Scouting award was renamed in his honor, and the William T. Hornaday Award is still bestowed today. Hornaday's Connecticut neighbor and protégé John Ripley Forbes (1913-2006) further advanced Hornaday's legacy through the William T. Hornaday Memorial Trust and later the Natural Science for Youth Foundation (both now defunct), which promoted the establishment of local natural science museums around the country. Forbes published a youth-oriented biography, In the Steps of the Great American Zoologist William Temple Hornaday (1966).

A year after Hornaday's death in Stamford, Connecticut, on March 6, 1937, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt suggested that Hornaday be honored by the naming of a mountain peak in Yellowstone National Park. Today Mount Hornaday stands sentinel over the Pebble Creek and Lamar River valleys at the northeast corner of the Park overlooking the abode of one of those crucial earlier remnant populations of bison.



**Mount Hornaday, Yellowstone National Park**

In the very first sentence of his very first book, Two Years in the Jungle, young Hornaday mused: “I shall always believe I was born under a lucky star as a compensation for not having been born rich.” That lucky star beamed over the community that would become Avon, Indiana, and its beneficence, through the endeavors of Avon’s native son William T. Hornaday, has incalculably enriched posterity.

[Lee Parsons, 2010]

***The Avon-Washington Township Public Library is proud to have a growing collection of books authored by native son, William Temple Hornaday. These items are housed in the new Huron Heritage Room, which will be open to the public beginning April 5, 2010.***

