

The Style Invitational

THIS WEEK'S CONTEST

Week 798: Dead Letters



BY BOB STAAKE FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

There ought to be a federal law Against the death of Sammy Baugh. The greatest Redskin that we knew Was also D.C. through and through. Though not a pol, he passed the test: For he could sling it with the best.

It's our yearly contest they've been dying to do: **This week: Write a humorous poem commemorating someone who died in 2008**, as in the paean above, contributed as is his wont by Gene N. Weingarten of Washington. Lists of "deaths 2008" and the like abound online.

Winner gets the Inker, the official Style Invitational trophy. Second place receives, in yet another purging from the household of Patty Hardee of Flint Hill, Va., a square white plastic tissue box whose front side is the back of a diorama of a bathroom, including toilet, sink, mirror, hair dryer, electric shaver and mouthwash. But this is no ordinary bathroom-diorama tissue box! On this one, each little item has a little red button that, when pushed, makes the appropriate annoying noise.

Other runners-up win a coveted Style Invitational Loser T-shirt. Honorable Mentions get one of the lusted-after Style Invitational Magnets. First Offenders get a smelly tree-shaped air freshener (Fir Stink for their First Ink). One prize per entrant per week. Send your entries by e-mail to losers@washpost.com or by fax to 202-334-4312. Deadline is Monday, Jan. 12. Put "Week 798" in the subject line of your e-mail, or it risks being ignored as spam. Include your name, postal address and phone number with your entry. Contests are judged on the basis of humor and originality. All entries become the property of The Washington Post. Entries may be edited for taste or content. Results will be published Jan. 31. No purchase required for entry. Employees of The Washington Post, and their immediate relatives, are not eligible for prizes. Pseudonymous entries will be disqualified. The revised title for next week's results is by Russell Beland; this week's Honorable Mentions name is by Michael Turniansky.

REPORT FROM WEEK 794

in which we asked for headlines a la those in the satirical newspaper the Onion:

- 4** Image of Tortilla Mysteriously Appears on Statue of Virgin Mary (M.C. Doman, Scottsdale, Ariz.)
- 3** Palin Is Prime Cause of 3rd-Quarter Drop in U.S. Jaws, Analysts Say (Phil Frankenfeld, Washington)
- 2** the winner of the Che Guevara doll and "Nixon Now" campaign button:
'Liberal Elitist Press' Condemned by Ignorant Lowlife Redneck Hatemongers (Chris Rollins, Cumberland, Md.)

ONION DIPS: HONORABLE MENTIONS

- Shoelace Collection Instantly Loses All Value When Only Other Collector Dies** (Eric Murphy, McLean)
- Rival Time Machine Makers Racing Back to Secure Earliest Patent** (Russell Beland, Fairfax)
- Comedians Seek Bailout Until White Guy Elected President Again** (Art Grinath, Takoma Park)
- Sun Discovered to Have Earthlike Planet** (Hugh Pullen, Vienna)
- 'Gave 110%' Passed Over Again by Cliche Hall of Fame** (Art Grinath)
- Huge Breakthrough in Stem Cell Research That You Wouldn't Understand** (Bob Sorensen, Herndon)
- Carllin Discovers Words You Can't Say in Heaven** (Art Grinath)
- Zimbabwe Prez Offers Blagojevich Asylum: 'He Already Knows How to Bleep the Bleeping People,' Mugabe Says** (Cheryl Davis, Arlington)
- Citing Need for Haste, Obama to Complete First Hundred Days in Six Weeks** (Russell Beland)
- NAACP Updates Goal to 'Advancement of Negro People'** (Russell Beland)
- Washington Post Drops Print Edition in Favor of Weekly Text Message** (Ellen Raphaeli, Falls Church)
- McMansion Demolished to Make Room for Three McHovels** (Mia Kim, Potomac, a First Offender)
- Area Model Will Just Have Water for Now, Thanks** (Beth Morgan, Palo Alto, Calif.)
- Man Who Edged Woman for Chief Exec Post Hires Her as Secretary** (Lee Dobbins, Arlington)
- Striving for Change, Ford Introduces Hybrid Edsel** (Bill Gee, Hunt Valley, Md.)
- Steve Doocy's Upper Lip Missing** (Jean Sorensen, Herndon)
- Patrick Fitzgerald Investigates Allegations He's**

- Too Good to Be True** (Greg Sanders, Silver Spring)
- Defeat of Prop 8 Somehow Fails to Save Troubled Marriage** (Greg Sanders)
- Mom's Forecast of Dishes Not Doing Themselves Proves Accurate** (Marc Naimark, Paris)
- Euro Disney Unveils Animatronic Hall of Inbred, Syphilitic Monarchs and Fascist Dictators** (Charlie Wood, Falls Church)
- Photo of Jesus Might Be a Hoax, Expert Claims** (Charley Owens, La Plata)
- Newspaper Industry Stakes Future on Monthly Obama Commemorative Editions** (Eric Murphy)
- 'It's Not Like I Killed Somebody!' Simpson Complains of Sentence** (John Folse, Bryans Road)
- Obama Beats Up Chuck Norris** (Jeffrey Contompassis, Ashburn)

AND THE WINNER OF THE INKER
In Final Trip to Beijing, Bush Calls on Premier to 'Tear Down This Wall'

(Malcolm Fleschner, Palo Alto, Calif.)

A tissue box that'll drown out your nose-blowing.



BY PATTY HARDEE

A Critical Connection to the Curious Case of Ota Benga

BENGA, From Page C1

Ota Benga's story began at the turn of the last century, in the forests of the Congo Free State, where he and his fellow tribesmen hunted elephant and antelope for subsistence, fending off hostile tribes and the murderous forces of Belgian King Leopold's Force Publique. In 1904, Benga was brought to the United States by the missionary, explorer and entrepreneur Samuel Phillips Verner, who had been hired by the St. Louis World's Fair to bring back Pygmies for an ethnographic exhibit. (Verner's story was recounted by his grandson Phillips Verner Bradford in the book "Ota Benga: The Pygmy in the Zoo," from which much of this account was taken.) Verner purchased Benga, whose wife and children had been killed in a massacre, from African slave traders, most likely saving his life. Later he brought Benga, seven other Pygmies and a young Congolese man to St. Louis, having promised to return the eight Pygmies when the fair ended.

The nine Africans proved to be one of the most popular attractions at the fair, where the crowds gawked, jeered and at one point threw mud pies at the human exhibit. From St. Louis, the group traveled to New Orleans just in time for Mardi Gras, and finally back to Africa, where eventually Benga — expressing a desire to learn to read — asked Verner to take him along when the explorer returned home. They arrived in New York in August 1906, when Benga's second and even more bizarre American odyssey began.

For generations, William Temple Hornaday has been the most storied and illustrious member of the Hornaday family tree, which has its roots in 18th-century Quaker settlements of North Carolina. A famous naturalist, he was a contemporary of Theodore Roosevelt's, a zealous ecological evangelist and preserver of wildlife who is credited with saving the American bison, among other species. A mountain peak in Yellowstone and an entire range in Mexico are named after William Temple Hornaday, as well as parks, a street in New York and a special Boy Scout medal for distinguished service in conservation. To most environmentalists, wildlife biologists and lovers of the outdoors, Hornaday is a hero.

My father never met "Temple," as he called his great-great-uncle. But he often related stories passed down from his own father, who recalled him as an eccentric man — a teetotaler, for example, known to make an exception for a glass or two of champagne. Another favorite family tale was how during his stint as the first director of the New York Zoological Park (more commonly known as the Bronx Zoo), Temple invited my grandfather, then a medical student, to come to New York and oversee the monkey house. (Before running the Bronx Zoo, Temple spent eight years at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, where he helped plan the National Zoo.)



SMITHSONIAN ARCHIVES

That would have been the same monkey house where Temple displayed Ota Benga, but I'd never heard his name until several years ago, when I heard his story on the radio. I was sipping coffee and reading the paper, wondering with half an ear how anyone could put a fellow human being in a zoo, when the name "William Temple Hornaday" rang out. I put the coffee down, mortified, and listened more closely. In 1906, Verner, looking for a place for Benga to live, finally brought him to the Bronx Zoo, where Temple welcomed him and, at first, simply let him walk the grounds, helping the workers, befriending the animals and keeping a relatively low profile. But one early September weekend, Temple decided to move Benga's hammock into an orangutan's cage, where he encouraged Benga to engage in such "picturesque" activities as playing with his simian companion, weaving caps out of straw and shooting his bow and arrow.

Outside the enclosure, Temple installed the following sign: "The African Pygmy, 'Ota Benga.' Age, 28 years. Height, 4 feet 11 inches.

Weight 103 pounds. . . Exhibited each afternoon during September."

It's tempting to see Temple's behavior as the random, racist act of an unusually insensitive outlier. But the more unsettling truth is that he was probably a typical, if exceptionally blinkered, product of his era. This was a time in which sideshows and arcades featured lurid burlesques on primitive themes and "authentic" Americana, in which the hucksterism and hustle of P.T. Barnum meshed commerce and mass culture, in which Jim Crow was at its height, lynchings were preserved for posterity on postcards, eugenics was gaining popularity and Darwin's theory of evolution was making inroads against encroaching notions of creationism. Putting human beings on display was nothing new: Nearly a hundred years earlier, Saartjie Baartman, from what is now South Africa, was exhibited in Britain as the "Hottentot Venus." Along with Ota Benga, Geronimo was a popular attraction at the St. Louis World's Fair, the Apache warrior and U.S. prisoner of war by then relegated to a



DIGITAL DOMAIN / PARAMOUNT PICTURES



BY STEPHEN BERKMAN

Bound by Ota Benga: Clockwise from left, William Temple Hornaday on the Mall with an endangered bison calf in 1886; Brad Pitt in "The Curious Case of Benjamin Button"; Marcus Wesley in "The Fall."

booth selling souvenirs and autographs.

It was most likely in the spirit of both Barnum and Darwin that Temple hit on the disastrous idea of putting Benga in the cage. The display, marketed with the right mix of sensationalism and pseudoscientific pretense, would have the double benefit of bringing in throngs of visitors to the zoo and advancing Darwin's theories, with Benga cast as the missing link. Ironically, it was on both those counts that black church leaders expressed outrage upon hearing of Benga's captivity. "Our race, we think, is depressed enough without exhibiting one of us with the apes," one minister wrote to New York's mayor, George McClellan (son of the Civil War general). Furthermore, he added, "the Darwinian theory is absolutely opposed to Christianity, and a public demonstration in its favor should not be permitted."

Reportedly, it didn't take long for Temple to cancel the monkey house exhibit, his otherwise impenetrable shell of hubris, condescension and naivete unequal to the controversy that he had unleashed. Benga

stayed at the zoo for several more days before he went to live in a home for African American orphans in Brooklyn, eventually settling in Lynchburg, Va., where he befriended the poet Anne Spencer. He died in 1916, after shooting himself in the heart.

Hornaday retired from the zoo in 1926 and continued to lobby on behalf of the environment as a director of the Permanent Wildlife Protection Fund. He died in 1937 and was buried in Stamford, Conn., with 16 Boy Scouts serving as an honor guard. In "The Hornadays, Root and Branch," a family tree published in 1979, Temple is called "an original, unusual man" and "a major figure among early giants of conservation."

The name Ota Benga is never mentioned.

When I first heard about Ota Benga, I asked my father whether he knew about him. He responded immediately and unself-consciously. "Oh yes," he said, his voice trailing off, an ellipsis that served as an apt metaphor for America's ongoing conversation about race, in which so much has gone unspoken, misremembered and distorted over hundreds of years. It's the same silence that explains why it's common to meet descendants of slaves, but far more rare to meet descendants of slave owners. It's the same silence that lets so many white Americans think of race as someone else's story.

How are sins of the fathers — or the great-great-great-uncles — properly accounted for by their successors? The moment I heard Temple's sordid story on the radio, my first impulse was to gain as much distance as possible. "He's not *my* relative," I remember thinking for an added moment. "I'm adopted!" Although it's true I'd been adopted as an infant, issues of blood and biology had never been major preoccupations. But for a brief instant I succumbed to the very genetic determinism that Temple himself might have endorsed.

Upon reflection, of course, I was right and wrong. Temple's descendants, biological or otherwise, obviously bear no direct responsibility for what he did. Our only responsibility, to the degree that we take pride in the family name, is to tell the story it represents fully, even when it doesn't follow a straight line of worthy accomplishment and moral rectitude.

For the past decade or so, I've taken to compulsively telling people about Temple and Ota Benga, especially when I meet someone familiar with the more heroic version of my distant uncle's story. Generally, the conversation begins with someone recognizing an uncommon last name. "Do you happen to be related to . . . ?" they'll ask.

With pleasantries about bison and Boy Scouts exchanged, I'll inevitably feel compelled to complete the record. "Did you know he put a Pygmy in a zoo?" I always blurt out a little too loudly. The full light of history often casts contradictory shadows, where a teetotaler drinks champagne and the better angels of a man's nature bump-tiously coexist with his demons.