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## HUNGRY AMERICA AND THE AFRICAN SOLUTION: HOW HIPPOPOTAMI NEARLY FED AMERICA

Tyler Dennis

Over the past few decades, an iconic slogan has become part of the American lexicon: “Beef. It’s What’s For Dinner.”<sup>1</sup> The slogan aimed to encourage Americans everywhere to buy beef products—indeed, beef and meat in general have been an important part of the American diet since the country’s inception. Although in today’s society a quick stroll to the local grocery store unveils a plethora of carnivorous options, having a surplus of meat was not always a privilege that Americans experienced. In the early twentieth century, the United States experienced a population boom, while livestock experienced threatening new diseases. The increase of both Americans and infected livestock created a meat shortage and a steep rise in the price of beef. Concerned about what had come to be known as the “Meat Question,”<sup>2</sup> Senator Robert Broussard collaborated with conservationist Frederick Burnham and Army Captain Fritz Duquesne to solve the problem. Unprecedented times called for an unprecedented solution, leading the trio to determine that bringing African hippopotami to America’s swamplands could alleviate national hunger. These men hoped that bringing the African hippopotamus to the American landscape would solve the issues of an ever-growing and prosperous nation by ensuring food security for generations to come.

The imbalance between an exponentially growing population and an effort to feed the people culminated in the early twentieth century and became known as the “Meat Question.”<sup>3</sup> As families went to the store, they faced the reality that meat had become more expensive. The American Economist noted that throughout a single lifetime, meat prices had nearly tripled: “In 1860 meat was 10 cents per pound,” while “[i]n 1910 meat was 25 cents per pound.”<sup>4</sup> While the price

of meat steadily increased across the decades, Americans remained attached to a red meat diet. No matter the price of meat, households learned to make the most of the products that they bought. In 1910, the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) released a book that informed families how to get the most nutrition from the meat that they purchased. Dr. C.F. Langworthy and Dr. Caroline Hunt provided both economic and nutritional information for the American public. They wrote, “This means that if the raw meat costs 20 cents per pound the cooked would represent an increase of 4 cents a pound on the original cost; but this increase would, of course, be lessened if all the drippings and gravy are utilized.”<sup>5</sup> While four cents may not amount to much even by the early 1900’s standards, that amount can be saved for each meal in which meat is served. Dr. Langworthy and Dr. Hunt continued to explain how public institutions could reap even larger savings by adjusting how meat is prepared and following their methods. With the prices of beef and other meats on the rise, the American public began to search for answers.

As the country became restless dealing with the ‘Meat Question,’ American households looked to their foreign counterparts as the reason for both the shortage and the rising price of meat. In the early twentieth century, the United States was seen as a safe haven for individuals from around the world. The increase in population also brought with it an increase in tension on local supply chains. Journalist Jon Mooallem discussed the sentiment of the time in “American Hippopotamus,” mentioning that “[b]eef prices had soared as rangeland had been ruined by overgrazing, and a crippled industry struggled to satisfy America’s explosively growing cities, an unceasing wave of immigrants, and a surging demand for meat abroad.”<sup>6</sup> Although immigration had

escalated, a larger population may not have been the sole reason for a meat shortage. Based on the census of 1910, the United States reported a total population size of 91,972,266.<sup>7</sup> At the same time, the Department of Homeland Security records indicated that 1,041,570 individuals had “obtained lawful permanent resident status.”<sup>8</sup> Compared to a country that already had over 90 million residents, an additional million immigrants is still a significant increase. However, as immigrants were dispersed across the country, this alone would not have created a strain on the meat market.

Alongside an ever-increasing population, the twentieth century also saw a surge in animal diseases. Several diseases specifically infected livestock, which included cattle across the nation. Two of the main diseases that plagued the cattle community were anthrax (referred to as splenic fever) and Texas fever.<sup>9</sup> These two diseases alone were enough to have an impact on the farming community. The Center for Disease Control (CDC) explained that cattle are infected with anthrax when they breathe in spores and can pass it “when people breathe in spores, eat food or drink water that is contaminated with spores, or get spores in a cut or scrape in the skin.”<sup>10</sup>

Simultaneously, Texas fever (believed to have been spread by ticks<sup>11</sup>) began to run rampant and the infected cows became malnourished, which resulted in their death. Just as Texas fever began to kill cattle,<sup>12</sup> legislators regulated the transportation of cattle, before the entire beef supply was demolished.

In 1910, the USDA completed a report on the widespread issue of splenic and Texas fever. In the “Twenty-Seventh Annual Report of the Bureau of Animal Industry,” the department explained that any animal who had contracted either disease should not be transported out of the state it resided in. The USDA continued,



Senator Robert Foligny Broussard in 1914. Photographers Harris & Ewing. Library of Congress.

During the continuance of this quarantine no cattle of that portion of Fulton County east of Spring River, or that portion of Sharp County north of Strawberry River, shall be moved or allowed to move, except as provided as for immediate slaughter, to any point in the United States not in the State of Arkansas which is located in an area not quarantined for splenic, southern, or Texas fever.<sup>13</sup>

“ The senator from Louisiana sought to personally reconcile the meat shortage in America, and his grand idea was to import the hippopotamus from Africa to the Louisiana swamps to serve as a new source of meat for the American people.

The USDA recommended that animals remain in their home counties until they were cleared by an inspector, without infection for six months, and with permission from an inspector from the state that the animals were being shipped to. While these measures were necessary to ensure safety for consumers, the new regulations further strained the meat supply. The culmination of a growing population and booming cities, alongside the deaths and transportation restrictions of cattle, together created the meat shortage in the United States.

Everyone from consumers and farmers to politicians frantically searched for an answer to the ‘Meat Question.’ Across the nation, individuals understood that rationing meat could not be sustained forever. In an attempt to quell their restless constituents, government officials pursued a resolution to the meat shortage. The one to take the lead on the issue was Senator Robert Foligny Broussard. The senator from Louisiana sought to personally reconcile the meat shortage in America, and his grand idea was to import the hippopotamus from Africa to the Louisiana swamps to serve as a new source of meat for the American people. He

organized a group of men to conduct research to determine if the project was feasible and presented their findings to the House of Representatives Committee on Agriculture. One of Senator Broussard’s key witnesses was Mr. W. N. Irwin from the Bureau of Plant Industry in the Department of Agriculture. Mr. Irwin determined that the hippopotamus had the potential to thrive in the swamps of Louisiana and could be used as a beef substitute. When the committee asked about his research, Mr. Irwin responded, “I am told that they will eat anything that cattle will eat, and many things that the cattle cannot get to—the water plants... I thought they would be useful in the Florida and Louisiana streams, to clear them out.”<sup>14</sup> Irwin also explained to the committee how quickly the hippopotamus grows, already weighing nearly two tons in infancy. The report boded well for Senator Broussard as he sought to fix both the meat shortage as well as the water hyacinth infestation in his state.

Louisiana was plagued by the hyacinth, a water plant that blocked waterways and fishing areas. In *The Big Muddy: An Environmental History of the Mississippi and its People from Hernando De Soto to Hurricane Katrina*, author Christopher Morris recounts how the water hyacinth took over Louisiana’s water routes. He explains, the “South American water hyacinth was introduced into Louisiana in the 1880s as an ornamental plant but spread into the wild. It actually impeded erosion by firming upriver and coastal banks. However, it also crowded out native plant and animal species, and clogged waterways and plantation ditches.”<sup>15</sup> The rapidly expansive water hyacinth further impacted Louisiana’s economy by slowing down water travel and blocking waterways used for farming. With the introduction of hippopotami to the Louisiana swamp to eat the water hyacinth, Senator Broussard’s legislation would provide meat as well as clear out the water hyacinth and propel the Senator to fame.

Throughout his political career, Senator Broussard was known for advocating new and occasionally quirky ideas. Historian Ann Wakefield's observations of the senator in what became known as "The Broussard Papers" illuminated unique aspects of Robert's life.<sup>16</sup> In "The Broussard Papers," Wakefield mentioned that while he grew up in rural Iberia Parish, Louisiana, Senator Broussard's family was able to send him to school at Georgetown, and he later studied law at Tulane University.<sup>17</sup> Once he graduated, he became ensconced in politics. Broussard quickly rose through the ranks, and by 1896 he was elected to the United States House of Representatives and then to the U.S. Senate in 1912.<sup>18</sup>

Backed by Senator Broussard, the 'Hippo Bill'<sup>19</sup> took the country by storm. In 1910, newspapers across the country rapidly spread the story of importing hippopotami to feed America. One such newspaper, The New York Tribune, reported on the story. It stated, "He proposes first that Congress shall appropriate \$250,000 to transport numerous species of wild animals from African jungles to the dense undergrowths and bayous of Louisiana, where these ferocious beasts may be tamed and domesticated, and their delicious flesh used to check the monopoly of the Beef Trust and reduce the cost of living."<sup>20</sup> Newspapers from all over the country reported on the story, each wanting exclusives and important updates on the ambitious project.<sup>21</sup> Senator Broussard seemed to have the American public on his side, however, he still needed congressional approval. His hope lay in former President Theodore Roosevelt, and two influential individuals of the twentieth century, Frederick Burnham and Fritz Duquesne.

One of the men that supported and brought national attention to the Hippo Bill was Frederick Russell Burnham. Often cited as the inspiration and model for the Boy Scouts, Burnham was revered as a world traveler and military scout.

Author Steve Kemper recounted tales from Burnham's life in *A Splendid Savage: The Restless Life of Frederick Russell Burnham*: from a young age he learned to make it on his own, working as a mail carrier for Western Union.<sup>22</sup> While he traveled across the southwest, he learned from older scouts how to survive in rugged terrain.<sup>23</sup> His training during these years equipped him for the life he would live, as his adventurous spirit soon led him to Africa. In Africa Burnham was recruited by the British government as a soldier and a spy, then once relieved from service he was hired by a London firm to scout new mining locations.<sup>24</sup> Explaining the hardships that Burnham faced during his travels, Kemper explained, "They killed a hippo for meat and used its grease on the pack ropes. They felt lucky not to lose a man or an animal to the hippos and crocodiles."<sup>25</sup> Throughout his time in Africa, Burnham learned to survive and adapt to the new landscape. Burnham would continue to travel between Africa and the United States, a career that would introduce him to fellow adventurer Theodore Roosevelt who, at the time, was police commissioner of New York City.<sup>26</sup> The two men immediately bonded over their shared interests in adventure and conservation, and Burnham continued his life in the private sector, traveling across Africa, Alaska, and Mexico searching for new mining sites.

Similar to many others in the early twentieth century, Burnham understood that the meat shortage was a significant problem and had independently investigated the possibility of introducing foreign wildlife to America. Kemper explains, "He began looking into the possibility in early 1905, corresponding with the world's foremost supplier of animals to zoos and circuses, a German named Carl Hagenbeck."<sup>27</sup> Burnham knew that a major setback to bringing foreign wildlife to America would be the transportation process. In fact, it was because of Burnham's efforts and work with hippopotami that Senator Broussard introduced him to the Hippo Bill, where he became

a key asset. Reporting to the Agricultural Committee on a similar project in that had been attempted in Alaska, Burnham explained,

The reindeer that were introduced into Alaska are all right. Mr. Jackson brought in the first herd. They had a good many difficulties and a good many things to learn about them. ... But as the result of the combination of the Lapps with some scientific study of the subject, I think it is conceded by the Alaskans themselves that the importation of reindeer is now a success.<sup>28</sup>

Burnham advocated that if exotic animals like reindeer could be introduced into new areas, then other animals, including the hippopotamus, could be successful as well. Now, with a senator who understood the government process and an individual who understood how to ship and inculcate exotic animals into America's heartland, the case for the Hippo Bill began to take shape. Senator Broussard wanted to ensure that the Hippo Bill had the best chance to become ratified, so he sought out another individual who understood both the African landscape and the mighty hippopotamus.

The third influential individual recruited for the Hippo Bill was Fritz Joubert Duquesne. While some aspects of Duquesne's life as a renowned spy seem to be exaggerated or even fabricated, what is clear was his admiration for wildlife. In *A Magnificent Lie: Fritz Joubert Duquesne - A Voice From The Grave*, author Paula Hewitt takes a unique look at the hunter, soldier, and spy. Born in South Africa, Duquesne grew up hunting with his father and fell in love with nature at an early age. By the time he was old enough, his family sent him to school in England, only for him to return by the time the Second Boer War began.<sup>29</sup> Despite his education in England, when the war began between the Boers and the British, Duquesne sided with his South African homeland. Because Duquesne grew up hunting in the South African landscape,

he knew the area well, and he was soon utilized as a scout for the Boers. While Duquesne was fighting for the Boers, he received word that a man named Frederick Burnham had orders to kill him.<sup>30</sup> Although Duquesne never faced Burnham in battle, the war still took its toll. Most of Duquesne's family had been killed, raped, or imprisoned, causing him to have a deep seething hatred for the British empire that lasted for the rest of his life.<sup>31</sup>

At the end of the war, Duquesne made it to America where he spent a brief stint as a journalist.<sup>32</sup> His writings often revolved around his time in Africa: the wildlife, the hunting, and the gorgeous landscape. The articles he wrote caught on and took the country by storm and added to America's infatuation with the African continent. Duquesne's writings entertained everyone across the nation, including President Roosevelt.<sup>33</sup> Before the end of President Roosevelt's term in office, he had planned a hunting trip to Africa and hired Duquesne as a guide.<sup>34</sup> Once the hunting party returned to America, they made national headlines with tales of the former President's endeavors on his African safari.<sup>35</sup> These stories caught the attention of Senator Broussard, not only because of the President's adventures, but also because of the guide who took him.

Senator Broussard soon approached Duquesne to evaluate Louisiana's landscape to determine if the hippopotamus could live in the swamps and to discuss his findings before a committee.<sup>36</sup> In 1910, Duquesne testified alongside Frederick Burnham, the same man that had orders to kill him only a few years before. In his opening remarks, Duquesne stated, "We have the hyacinth down there, but it does not grow over the country like it grows here. ... The hippopotamus will eat all water plants, all the aquatic plants."<sup>37</sup> He continued, "The Boers were in the habit of going down to the river and killing a hippo and bringing it in and dividing it among the different



families in the district. It is pretty hard to get rid of four and a half tons of meat.”<sup>38</sup> When Fritz Duquesne stood before the committee, he gave real-world applications of bringing hippopotami to the United States. Duquesne explained how the hippopotamus could solve both the growing hyacinth problem in Louisiana and be a viable meat alternative to feed Americans.

Broussard, Burnham, and Duquesne had done their best to demonstrate to the United States government why the hippopotamus was the best solution to the meat shortage. After years of researching, collaborating, and documenting their findings, the decision now lay in the hands of the committee members and the government. On March 21, 1910, HR 23261, the ‘Hippo Bill,’ was introduced to the House of Representatives, and that is where the bill also died.<sup>39</sup> The vote in the House killed the bill, which did not move forward to the United States Senate.



An adult and baby hippopotamus at the National Zoo, Washington, D.C., early 1900s. National Photo Company Collection, Library of Congress.

While Senator Broussard understood the political reasons for HR 23261’s failure, Burnham and Duquesne had their

own opinions. Burnham, who was in direct contact with former President Roosevelt, believed that animosity between members of the committee and President Roosevelt led to the bill’s downfall. Members of Congress saw this bill and others similar to it as a tax-funded hunting trip for President Roosevelt and his friends. Steve Kemper explains Burnham’s reasoning, “In 1906 two California congressmen introduced bills to put it into action, but the idea was attacked as an attempt to use federal funds to set up a hunting reserve for Roosevelt’s wealthy friends.”<sup>40</sup> Congress likely saw the Hippo Bill as a way to reallocate funds from other programs in order for politicians to have their own safari in America’s backyard.

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While Burnham took a more cynical view of the Hippo Bill’s downfall, Duquesne pointed towards a larger financial issue. In his statement before the committee, Duquesne expounded on the price for bringing hippopotami to America, and mentioning Mr. Hagenbeck’s estimate, he stated that “He sells them to circuses, and charges \$8,000 a piece for them.”<sup>41</sup> The American taxpayer would have been further burdened with the exorbitant price of shipping and maintaining the animals. The high cost of importing animals to America may have played a larger role in the downfall of the Hippo Bill than historians previously believed. Less than four years after the bill was brought before Congress, the first World War