

June 11, 2020

Dear Iowa State University Community,

This week on Twitter, information was posted about W. T. Hornaday (1854 - 1937) who was the first director of the Bronx Zoo from 1899 to 1926. Hornaday created a racist exhibit at the Bronx City Zoo involving a Congolese man, Ota Benga.

Hornaday attended ISU from March 1872 to November 1873, and received an honorary master's degree in 1903. After Hornaday retired from the Bronx Zoo, a bronze plaque was dedicated on campus in 1926 in recognition of his work as a conservationist.

The New York Times wrote an account, *The Scandal in the Zoo*, which provides details of how Hornaday, the Bronx Zoo director, set up an "exhibit" in which Ota Benga lived in the Monkey House section of the Bronx Zoo with an orangutan during the weekend of Saturday, Sept. 6, 1906.

The story, appearing in 2006 at the 100-year mark of this racist act, notes that a Black clergyman, Rev. James H. Gordon, vigorously protested this exhibit, and was quoted by the Times as stating, "Our race, we think, is depressed enough, without exhibiting one of us with the apes. We think we are worthy of being considered human beings, with souls."

The protest led to the end of the exhibit with Ota Benga. However, W.T. Hornaday appeared unapologetic about the incident. He was quoted by the Times as stating, "When the history of the Zoological Park is written, this incident will form its most amusing passage." Tragically, ten years later, in 1916, Ota Benga committed suicide.

The New York Times article can be found here: <https://www.nytimes.com/2006/08/06/nyregion/thecity/06zoo.html>. Also in 2006, a National Public Radio story covered this controversy with a nine-minute audio report: <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=5787947>. Please note this recording contains offensive language.

Various books have been written about this topic, including *Ota Benga: The Pygmy in the Zoo* by Phillips Bradford and Harvey Blume. Bradford is the grandson of the man who brought Ota Benga from the Congo to the United States.

Hornaday's actions and attitudes that he expressed in response to the controversy are indefensible, reprehensible, and racist. I have asked ISU Parks Library to look into the

stated reasons for the creation of the plaque in 1926, so that we can understand it historically as a part of our own campus history.

This issue highlights a broader question about the need for a policy and process to more systematically address questions about historical naming and honors. Stanford University has a well-developed policy on renaming that provides a good [example](#). I have asked Vice President for Diversity and Inclusion Reginald Stewart and Faculty Senate President Carol Faber to co-chair a committee to review the re-naming principles at Stanford and other universities and make a recommendation for a formal Iowa State University re-naming policy and process. The policy developed will allow us to examine the Hornaday plaque and other historic naming and honoring decisions in a consistent and well-thought-out process with well-defined standards that can be applied when issues arise.

As an interim action, the bronze plaque will be removed and placed in the Parks Library Archive. Additionally, a website is being established on the [University Library page](#) to provide links to information and resources for those interested in this material. Once the formal renaming policy has been adopted, a permanent decision will be made regarding the Hornaday plaque and the conferral of Hornaday's honorary degree will be reconsidered.

I have also asked the University Library to begin a review of all honorific naming on campus and to recommend other historical campus naming decisions that should be reconsidered under the new re-naming policy once it has been adopted.

In my campus message yesterday, I asked all of you to join me in rededicating ourselves to creating an ISU community of care, empathy, and positive change. I believe the actions outlined above are an important step in that direction.

Sincerely,

Wendy Wintersteen
President