

Topsy: An elephant we must never forget

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They say an elephant never forgets. If only we were equally capable of remembering each and every elephant whose life we have taken, we may not be standing on the brink of their extinction. There are many elephants whose lives deserve our respect. But there is one Asian elephant, in particular, who, I believe, deserves our special recognition.

Topsy was in her late twenties when she was murdered at Luna Park on Coney Island in New York on 4 January 1903. The murder scene was at one of America's first theme parks at a time when the USA was emerging as an industrial world leader.

My use of the word “murdered” rather than “killed” is deliberate. Her life and death represent the fate of many animals – not just elephants and not just in the entertainment industry.

Topsy's stated crime was manslaughter for which she was sentenced to death. Even though she killed and attacked, I believe she was innocent. Topsy's true crime – if indeed it was an offence – was to be an elephant. To be more precise, it was to be guilty of being a wild-caught elephant held captive in a human-made environment unnatural for her kind. Why should we be surprised when abused elephants attack and kill people? Perhaps we should be surprised that they do not do it more often. Should elephants like Topsy be held responsible for their actions when the human impact on their lives is the real reason why they behave as they do?

In 1903 awareness about elephants and their psychological and behavioural needs was not as it is today. There were no elephant sanctuaries that could have sheltered her for the remainder of her life. Instead, Topsy was doomed to die. Elephant deaths in the entertainment industry were not that unusual back then. Sadly, they are not rare today either. But the rationale and methods of Topsy's death were extraordinary.

On the day of her execution, she was first fed three carrots laced with 460 grams of potassium cyanide, which appeared to have no effect. Then she was electrocuted with 6,600 volts of electricity for 10 seconds, which killed her. But three veterinarians did not declare her dead until she had been hanged by the neck for ten minutes after the poisoning and the electrocution. Her death was filmed by Thomas Edison's Moving Picture Company, and subsequently became important footage in the history of filmmaking.

However, more is known about how Topsy's life ended than how it began.

Early life

Most likely, she was born in southeast Asia – India, Sri Lanka, Indochina, or Indonesia – in about 1875. She was probably captured with her mother in a kheddah, a large stockade which elephants are forced to enter to escape gunshots, noise, and fire used by beaters to direct them into the compound. Although we will never know for sure, it is possible she witnessed the murder of her mother. It was – and still is – customary for hunters and poachers to kill mothers to capture their babies. At the very least, she was separated permanently from her mother in her first or second year when she was still suckling.

Today, we know that elephants are intelligent, social animals with complex emotional, psychological, and behavioural needs. Baby elephants suckle up to two to three years of age; adults both nurture their young and care for their sick and elderly. They reach

sexual maturity at 9-15 years of age and can live up to 60 years. They can grow up to 10 feet high at the shoulder and weigh 2.25 to 5.5 tons. They eat as much as 300 pounds of food a day, which requires walking about 10 miles a day. An elephant herd will defend itself against humans and other animals. They acknowledge death and pay respects to the dead. They recognise themselves in mirrors. They communicate over great distances. Each has his or her own individual personality. Their matriarchal society prospers under the tutelage and leadership of elder elephants.

But this life was denied to the baby elephant who became Topsy.

She was shipped thousands of miles from southeast Asia across land and sea to the USA via Germany. This journey would have taken four to six months. She would have travelled as cargo, chained in place, in the dark hold of ships and goods wagons pulled by trains.

This baby elephant was sold by Carl Hagenbeck, the international wildlife dealer based in Hamburg, Germany. His clients included America's leading showmen, circus impresarios, and arch rivals: P.T. Barnum and Adam Forepaugh. Both had bought elephants and other wild animals from Hagenbeck for their circuses.

This baby elephant's arrival in America coincided with the country's centenary in 1876. Barnum opened his show with a 13-cannon salute – one each for the original colonies. Forepaugh called his circus the Great Centennial Show. Moreover, Forepaugh knew that for the young country, which at that time was welcoming thousands of immigrants from Europe, having the first American-born elephant would resonate with the celebration of independence, national pride, and pioneering spirit. To be among the first American-born is to be part of America's exceptionalism – even if you are an elephant.

But Forepaugh did not have the first American-born elephant. He did have a baby Asian elephant, who arrived in New York during the winter of 1876. Unlike previous elephants and other wild-caught animals whose arrivals in the USA were greeted with much public celebration and press attention, this baby elephant was discretely unloaded in New York and secretly brought to Forepaugh's winter quarters in Philadelphia.

This furtive behavior, Forepaugh assumed, would help him to pull off a major publicity stunt. In February 1877, Forepaugh announced he had a baby male elephant born in the USA who stood 18 inches high. But Barnum suspected Forepaugh was lying and that he had bought the baby Asian elephant from Hagenbeck. So Barnum issued a public challenge. "It is an established zoological fact that elephants do not breed in captivity," he countered. Maybe Forepaugh suspected that Barnum had found out the truth about the baby Asian elephant. Or maybe Barnum was simply calling Forepaugh's bluff. Regardless, Forepaugh quietly withdrew his first American-born claim.

When Topsy was born she would have weighed about 200 pounds and stood about three feet tall. She would have consumed as much as three gallons of milk a day and increased her weight by as much as 30 pounds a week. Her quick growth most likely inspired her name, from a famous book. In Harriet Beecher Stowe's 1852 novel, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Miss Ophelia asks the young slave Topsy, "Do you know who made you?" "Nobody as I knows on," she replies. 'Spect I grow'd. Don't think nobody ever made me.' It is not unreasonable to speculate that the book's popularity and her "'Spect I grow'd" comeback inspired the phrase to "grow like Topsy". Forepaugh named the baby elephant Topsy because she grew quickly, and at her death, she was 10 feet high and measured nearly 20 feet from trunk to tail.

Circus days

Life for elephants in American circuses in the late 19th century is not that much different from how they live today. Topsy lived a peripatetic life, travelling on foot and by train coast to coast with elephants who were strangers. Prolonged periods of chained

boredom were alleviated only by short periods of intense activity. She was forced to behave in ways that had no meaning to her, but the paying audience was entertained by the silly tricks.

Elephants do not, of course, perform in the wild; they have to be trained. This can be done with positive reinforcement, including praise and reward, or with blows and jabs from the bullhook. Or it can involve both, which was Topsy's case. She was trained by Forepaugh's son, Addie Forepaugh, who abused her, and by Moses "Eph" Thompson, a young African-American man who treated her more kindly.

In 1902 Topsy was involved with two fateful incidents. First, James Fielding Blount, a drunkard who attached himself to what became the Forepaugh and Sells Brothers Circus, teased the sleeping, resting elephants. He had a glass of whiskey and was smoking a cigar. When he reached Topsy, his glass was empty but he still teased her with it. He threw sand in her face because she did not pay him any attention. Then he stabbed his lit cigar into her extremely sensitive trunk. This was too much for Topsy. She wrapped her trunk around his waist, held him up high in the air and threw him to the ground, crushing him with her body and killing him.

The second incident occurred some days later. Elephants were being unloaded from a train and were waiting to walk onto the next location. Topsy was approached by Louis Doderer, a local young man, who had a stick that he started to use against her. She seized him around the waist, hoisted him into the air and threw him to the ground. She raised her right foot to crush him but was stopped by a circus worker. Doderer survived, but the sequence of events that led to Topsy's murder had been set in motion. The Forepaugh and Sells Brothers Circus knew that they could no longer keep Topsy. Later that day, they announced she had been sold. She eventually became the property of Frederick Thompson and Elmer "Skip" Dundy.

A year earlier at the Pan-American Exposition in Buffalo, New York, Thompson and Dundy operated a virtual ride called a Trip to the Moon, which featured an airship called Luna. In late 1902, they were establishing Luna Park on Coney Island, which included moving the popular Trip to the Moon ride down the boardwalk to a new location in time for the spring opening. Thompson and Dundy bought Topsy and assigned a handyman, Frederick "Whitey" Ault, to supervise her. Whitey was a drunkard who abused Topsy as she dragged the moon ride along the boardwalk and helped to build Luna Park. He was arrested twice for beating Topsy.

Thompson and Dundy realised that, with Luna Park's opening only months away, they had to maintain positive relationships with residents, police, and the press. This meant they had to resolve the related problems of Whitey and Topsy, who would follow only Whitey's instructions. Thompson and Dundy knew they could fire Whitey, but what about Topsy?

Although far from an everyday occurrence, dangerous elephants were regularly killed by zoos and circuses. This included those who experience musth, the periodic condition involving aggressive behaviour. Hiding behind the glamour of entertainment, circus owners killed elephants when they became dangerous. They poisoned, shot, strangled, and hanged them. Examples include Barnum & Bailey Circus, which had killed five elephants during a recent European tour and another on board a docked ship in New York in March 1902. Later that year a keeper at the Central Park Zoo killed an elephant with poisoned bran. Press reports about these incidents appeared not to upset public opinion or arouse the concerns of the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals.

The War of Currents

Thompson and Dundy found themselves in similar circumstances with Topsy. They would have recalled that the Buffalo expo was the first event of its kind to make full use of electricity, including electric lighting, and featured a failed attempt to electrocute an elephant named Jumbo II.

The expo occurred after the so-called War of Currents had ended. This was the battle fought for about 10 years in the late 1880s between Thomas Edison and George Westinghouse. They each wanted the electricity that their companies generated (direct current and alternating current, respectively) to fuel America's growing industrial empire.

In 1887, in an attempt to discredit Westinghouse and his preference for alternating current, Edison electrocuted 44 dogs, two calves and one horse to prove AC was more dangerous than DC. The press were invited to watch these experiments. Even though he opposed capital punishment, Edison also secretly paid for the first electric chair to be built for the State of New York to demonstrate that AC was deadlier than DC. He believed if he could show the danger of AC, only then he would be able to win the War of Currents and empower Americans with DC. Ironically, by the time of the Buffalo expo, both Edison and Westinghouse had lost control of their business empires, and alternating current had become the way in which electricity was delivered throughout the USA.

Thompson and Dundy decided they had to kill Topsy and use it as an opportunity to attract as much attention as possible to Luna Park's opening. But how could they kill her publicly? Shooting Topsy was not an option, since it was impossible to find an elephant gun in the country. The ASPCA stopped them from hanging her, partly because they were concerned with it becoming a public spectacle. It was agreed that only invited people could attend Topsy's execution. An audience of at least 800 people and 100 photographers witnessed Topsy's murder.

The War of Currents is often cited as the reason why Topsy was electrocuted. The claim is made that Edison wanted to show AC, which Westinghouse preferred, was so dangerous it could even kill an elephant. But the War of Currents was over by the time of Topsy's killing in 1903. Besides, neither AC nor DC is necessarily more dangerous than the other, which was understood at that time.

Topsy was electrocuted because she was typecast as a villain in a much larger drama playing itself out on the human stage. She became collateral damage in the War of Currents, even though it was largely over. She was a wild animal whose potential for dangerous behaviour could never be controlled, through no fault of her own. Yes, you can take wild animals out of the wild and believe they can be tamed. But you cannot take the wild out of a wild animal and make them tame.

It would be reassuring to believe that the poisoning and electrocution of elephants no longer happens but this is not the case. For example, more than 80 elephants were poisoned after poachers used cyanide to poison a water hole in Zimbabwe's Hwange National Park in September 2013. The London-based NGO, Elephant Family, reports scores of endangered Asian elephants are electrocuted and killed by low hanging power lines each year in India.

The Edison Moving Picture Company made the film *Electrocuting an Elephant* to capture a dramatic moment in the development of America's industrial manufacturing empire. It showed the power and control we have over the natural world. Expediency and spectacle conspired with power and profit. Her "dramatic" death was captured on film whereas poachers, for example, try to keep their murderous activities hidden from public sight.

Topsy, of course, never asked to be captured. Or to be forcefully relocated to another continent. Or to be kept by people who did not understand her needs. She never asked to

be beaten or abused in the mistaken belief that doing so would give her keepers power and control over her. And yet, this was her fate. Topsy killed out of fear and retaliation. And she paid for it dramatically with her life.

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Figure 1: Poster for the Forepaugh & Sells Brothers circus: "Terrific flights over ponderous elephants"



Figure 2: The electrocution of Topsy – Coney Island, New York, January 1903

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