

## Charles Jesse Jones (1844-1919)

On 12 June 1897, 53-year-old Charles Jesse ("Buffalo") Jones left Garden City, Kansas, for the Far North to do what nobody had done: capture a muskox and bring it back alive to "civilization". Jones was already internationally famous as "The Savior of the American Bison". A former buffalo hunter, he experienced remorse when he saw overkill pushing the species toward extinction. He began lassoing calves from wild herds, rearing them on his Kansas ranch, then cross-breeding them with cattle to create hybrids he called "cattalo". He hoped these would prove more practical for western and northern ranges than cattle or buffalo.

In 1889 he had caused an international incident by purchasing nearly all the buffalo left in Canada, Major Bedson's noted Manitoba herd, for an estimated \$50,000 (about \$500,000 in today's money) for 83 head — over the protest of the Dominion government.

In 1891 Jones created a further sensation by taking a shipment of buffalo to England for sale to breeders and zoos. Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show had acquainted England with live buffalo but never with anything like this lanky frontiersman-entrepreneur who resembled a cartoonist's Uncle Sam. Jones was invited to Buckingham Palace to visit the Prince of Wales.

He then went to Edmonton where he bought a ton of supplies, including a rubber life preserver for strapping around himself while floating northward down rivers that led to the muskox range. Jones was driven by a passion to capture and tame wild animals. Perhaps it stemmed from the words of Genesis read aloud by his father in their Illinois cabin: "replenish the earth...have dominion over...every living thing". To Jones it seemed God had commanded him to go forth and subdue all animals in His name.

At Fort Smith on the Slave River he was invited by Indians to a council. "The muskox is sacred to us", they warned. "If you take muskox away, it will offend the Great Spirit. All our game will leave!"

Jones replied he'd come not to destroy, but to preserve an animal they killed for food. He wanted muskoxen for study and use as well as display. He might even hybridize them with cattle. He advised the Indians to domesticate and propagate muskox as ordained by the Great Spirit in the White Man's Bible; then they would never starve. The Chippewas, Crees, and Slaves who comprised the council left planning how to thwart Jones.

In company with a brawny Scot named Rea, Jones built a winter cabin on Great Slave Lake. In February 1898 he and Rea started for the muskox range. After harrowing adventures they discovered a herd in snowy wasteland north of the Dubawnt River. The muskoxen split into two groups as they approached. In one were five calves. Jones's famous lasso came into play. When the five were captured, they were fitted with hackamores and tethered at intervals to a long rope.

But as the men traveled south with their prizes, the Indians struck. While Jones and Rea slept in their tent, each calf's throat was cut in what appears to have been a ritual killing. In the snow nearby Jones found a bloody knife, its blade fastened to a caribou rib, apparently left behind deliberately. Thus ended Jones's dream of capturing a muskox. Others, marching to the words of another god, had thwarted him. Undismayed, he returned home via the Mackenzie River and Yukon gold camps, inspecting an island in the Bering Sea with a view to establishing a breeding farm for silver foxes.

Jones was part hero, part entrepreneur, part promoter, always indomitable. He had a vision of mankind and wild animals living together in mutually beneficial fashion. Today's hybridizing and captive breeding programs continue his dream.

In 1902 President Theodore Roosevelt named him first game warden of the newly created Yellowstone Park. Poachers were decimating the park's wildlife. Roosevelt wanted someone who could stop them; Jones did. Soon he introduced Zane Grey to the West by taking him on a trip to lasso lions in Arizona. Grey, impressed, decided to make the West the subject of his writing and to pattern his heroes on Jones. Grey's book about their hunting trip and Jones's life, *The Last of the Plainsmen*, appeared just in time for Jones's next adventure.

In 1910 he was off to lasso bigger lions, those in Africa. He brought one back to the Bronx Zoo.

This led to his greatest challenge. The gorilla, publicized as the "missing link" between man and ape, had never been brought into captivity and survived. At age 75 Jones went to West Africa and lassoed one. But it was so strong it broke even his famous lasso. Before he could catch another, the outbreak of World War I forced abandonment of his plans.

Typically, death found him writing a book about his experiences and promoting a centrifugal siphon pump he'd invented, while dreaming of crossing domestic sheep with Rocky Mountain bighorns. The *New York Times* for 2 October 1919 said: "Charles Jesse Jones, known throughout America as 'Buffalo Jones', famous cowboy and big game hunter and friend of the late former President Theodore Roosevelt, died today". The lengthy obituary failed to say that Jones was the first, great, and highly original preserver-user of North America's wildlife.

### FURTHER READINGS

- EASTON, ROBERT and BROWN, MACKENZIE. 1970. Lord of Beasts — The Saga of Buffalo Jones. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.  
 GREY, ZANE. 1908. The Last of the Plainsmen. New York: Outing Publishing Co.  
 JONES, CHARLES JESSE with INMAN, HENRY. 1899. Buffalo Jones' Forty Years of Adventure. Topeka: Kansas Publishing Co.

Robert Easton and Mackenzie Brown



"Buffalo" Jones, original photo by Cherry Kearton, first published in 1911. This was probably at the time of Jones's journey to Africa. Courtesy of R. Easton and M. Brown.