

# The Hippopotamus: A Companion Mammal for Louisiana Irises?

~Story by Patrick O'Connor

Gardeners frequently seek information about plants to grow compatibly with our water-loving Louisiana irises. Suggestions abound for companion plants that share an affinity for conditions ranging from consistently damp to persistently flooded. By contrast, companion mammals have been virtually ignored, if not entirely.

Is it possible to correct this imbalance in a single article? No, because the whole concept is absurd. Still, a fair telling of Louisiana iris history requires that we know about a close encounter with a mammal that could have radically altered these fine plants' development.

## HR 23261 – The Hippo Bill

You should know up front that this is a what-might-have-been story.<sup>1</sup> It has complex antecedents, but a good place to start is with legislation introduced in Congress in 1910 – HR 23261 – by Representative Robert Broussard of New Iberia, Louisiana. Its purpose was to appropriate \$250,000 to import “useful new animals” to the United States. The importation of primarily African animals – especially hippos – had been on Broussard’s mind for some time, but a constellation of forces and personalities combined to make 1910 the time to act.

**Congressman Robert Foligny “Cousin Bob” Broussard (1864-1918).** For the seven-term congressman, it was a flower, the Water Hyacinth, that triggered his legislation. The invasive, non-native plants had choked the bayous and streams of Broussard’s South Louisiana district. They hogged oxygen, killed fish, hampered navigation, and destroyed livelihoods. The South American plant had been brought to New Orleans in 1884 as part of an international cotton exposition. It escaped into the



Photo by Gene Taylor

wetlands, and with rampant asexual reproduction, spread beyond a mere nuisance to become a significant economic problem.

Efforts to control them were unsuccessful. Broussard latched onto the idea that a water-loving, 3-6,000 pound herbivore living in Louisiana’s lakes and bayous and consuming nearly 90 pounds of vegetation per day might devour the invasive hyacinth problem.

## The “Meat Question.”

While South Louisiana was suffering from water hyacinths, the nation in 1910 faced a larger problem: a dwindling meat supply. Population growth, driven in part by immigration, and overgrazed rangelands caused meat prices to

soar. Westward expansion was nearing its end. That outlet, useful in addressing earlier shortages and other problems, appeared to be nearly exhausted.

Several individuals had promoted a unique solution: diversify the American diet by making new meats available. They had promoted the importation of mainly African animals for several years, and the hippopotamus was the most significant and certainly the most weighty of these. Chomping on water hyacinths may have been a bonus, but it was a hippo diet that they envisioned.

These advocates’ backstories were as fascinating as the notion of raising hippos in Louisiana’s wetlands was bizarre. Congressman Broussard is probably the least interesting of the group. Still, his ability to propose legislation was a means to achieve the overlapping objectives of others. On March 24, 1910, Broussard assembled three notable authorities to testify in a hearing on HR 23261.

## Major Frederick Russell Burnham (1861-1947).

Frederick Burnham was an “American scout and world-traveling adventurer.” He was born on a Dakota Sioux reservation in Minnesota, where he learned the ways



<sup>1</sup> This account relies heavily on an utterly fascinating article by Jon Mooallem that is available online. It is highly recommended.  
<https://magazine.atavist.com/american-hippopotamus>

of American Indians as a boy. By the age of 14, he was supporting himself in California and learning scouting from some of the American Southwest's last cowboys and frontiersmen. He later worked as a civilian tracker for the United States Army in the Apache Wars.

Burnham sought out adventure and conflicts, and in 1893 moved his family to southern Africa where he worked with the British colonial army in Rhodesia, now Zimbabwe. He served as a scout in the Anglo-Boer wars in which the British fought the descendants of Dutch settlers for colonial control. He also fought with the British in an uprising of the indigenous Matabele people against British control of their lands. Burnham's rank of major was in the British Army and conferred along with other decorations by King Edward VII in recognition of his service.

The years after the war were a painful time spent recovering from serious war injuries and the deaths of two children. One, a daughter died partially due to starvation during the war, and a son drowned in London later. Eventually, Burnham began developing an idea that others were working on simultaneously. As summarized by Jon Mooallem,

"The idea was to import hippopotamuses from Africa, set them in the swamplands along the Gulf Coast, and raise them for food. The idea was to turn America into a nation of hippo ranchers."

By the time of Broussard's hearing in 1910, Major Burnham was a larger-than-life figure and had published an article, "Transplanting African Animals." He was a friend of Teddy Roosevelt and had secured the former President's endorsement of the idea. Burnham was on the same page as Broussard, although with a somewhat different slant, and he was a perfect witness at the Hippo Bill hearing.

**William Newton Irwin.** The first witness was W. N. Irwin, a researcher at the U. S. Department of Agriculture. Irwin worked in the pomological branch of the Bureau of Plant Industry – essentially an apple guy. But he had endorsed the notion that, since there was little new rangeland that could be developed in the country, it was necessary to use the resources of barren or "worthless" lands, such as Gulf Coast wetlands. Adding the USDA imprimatur to the concept, he advocated the importation of other animals as well as hippos, telling *The Washington Post*:

"I hope to live long enough to see herds of these broad-backed beasts wallowing in the Southern marshes and rivers, fattening on the millions of tons of food which awaits their arrival; to see great droves of white rhinoceri ... roaming over the semiarid desert wastes, fattening on the sparse herbage which these lands offer; to see herds of the delicate giraffe, the flesh of which is the purest and sweetest of any known

animal, browsing on the buds and shoots of young trees in preparation for the butchers block ...."

This sounded crazy to many, but Irwin asserted that the only reason people would not embrace hippo meat was that their neighbors don't. In his testimony, Burnham pointed out that the principal meat sources that Americans are accustomed to – beef, pork, poultry, and sheep – are not native but were imported into the country.

**Captain Frederick "Fritz" Duquesne (1877–1956).** The final witness at Congressman Broussard's hearing was a man who has been variously described as "clever, educated, and resourceful" and "a strong and remarkable man." Also, as a con man, "the human epitome of sin and deception," a megalomaniac, and an "inveterate liar."



At the time of Rep. Broussard's hearing, these extremes in Duquesne's personality were not recognized, except perhaps by Frederick Burnham. He and Duquesne (pronounced du-cain) fought on opposite sides in Africa. Duquesne was a Boer spying and fighting against the British, while Burnham was a scout for the British forces during the Second Boer War. Each was very much aware of his counterpart. In fact, each was expressly assigned to kill the other. Their paths did not cross, however.

The war ended with a British victory, and the British Empire claimed the Transvaal and other Boer territories. With the help of Boers living in the Eastern United States, Fritz Duquesne made his way to America, where he set out on the path of an immigrant. Mooallem's description is compact:

"He went to New York and got a job selling subscriptions for the *New York Sun*. Soon, after proving himself and deploying enough of his charm, he was bumped up to reporter. [He was] ... living his own lonely version of the classic American immigrant story – reinventing himself, hustling. And it was working. Seven years later, Fritz Duquesne found himself sitting in the White House with the President of the United States."

TR was near the end of his term, and in early 1909 the former President was planning a well-choreographed big-game-hunting expedition to East Africa.

"Roosevelt spent months studying up, writing letters to men who'd hunted in the region, figuring out which



caliber firearm to use on which species and how exactly to topple a lion or rhino. Somehow, Duquesne, with his native's knowledge of the continent and its wildlife, had inserted himself into this informal committee of experts and was invited to meet with the President that January. They talked for more than two hours."

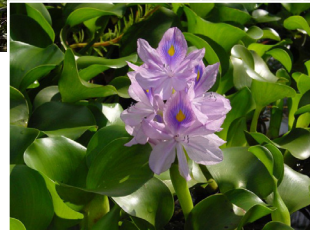
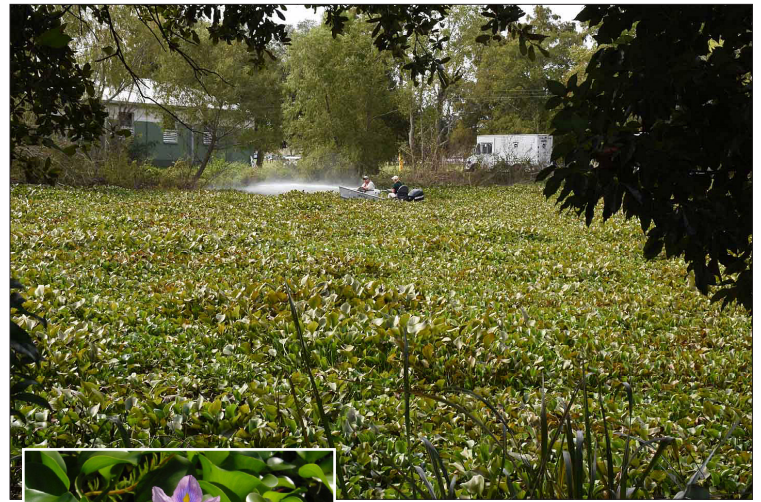
From such a position, it is not hard to imagine how Duquesne would wrangle an invitation to appear with Burnham at the hearing on transplanting African animals. The two old enemies were able to cooperate – then and later – and probably they accorded a soldier's respect to each other.

The hearings on the Hippo Bill did not result in its passage. Many favorable comments appeared in the press, but others maintained the idea was preposterous. Insufficient time was left in the 1910 congressional session to secure passage, and it was agreed that the measure should be introduced again in 1911. This time, however, it would be with the support of the organization they would form. During the next year, and for several after that, Broussard, Duquesne, Burnham, and others attempted to forge an effective lobbying organization called the "New Food Supply Society."

The organization never coalesced. Duquesne worked most doggedly, but the other principals were pulled in different directions by other activities. Also, the blush of support for the idea of importing African animals to address the meat shortage began to fade. Irwin died the year after the hearing, and the Department of Agriculture reversed its support. No doubt with the approval of interests representing cattlemen, meat processors, and others, the USDA came down in favor of converting wetlands and other unused lands to the grazing of cattle rather than introducing exotic species. The Hippo Bill was never voted down. The concept behind it just slowly died out.

### What If: An Iris Nightmare?

It is easy to speculate about some of the changes that would have been triggered had hippos been introduced into Louisiana's lakes and bayous, but secondary and tertiary environmental effects may be unimaginable. Not to trivialize widespread ecological disruption, consider the implications for iris growers.



*Pontederia crassipes*

**Water hyacinths in summer clogging the lagoon adjacent to the Greater New Orleans Iris Society's planting in City Park. A Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries crew is spraying herbicide from a boat. Where's one good hippo when you need it?**

Dr. John K. Small "discovered" *I. giganteaerulea* on a train ride through eastern New Orleans in 1925. He was so fascinated by the wild irises that he returned every year until around 1932 to study, identify and publicize new species. What if, instead of mere moccasins and alligators, he had encountered herds of 4,000-pound hippos that had been procreating freely since 1910 or so? Or what if the swamps were protected by Hippo Ranchers intent on protecting their turf? (Well, not "turf" in this case; but say, parcels of muck).

Hippos are testy and aggressive. They are considered the world's deadliest large land mammal, and they kill an estimated 500 people a year in Africa. Would the Era of Collecting wild irises – so crucial to the development of

modern hybrids – have occurred? Would ordinary gardeners have ventured out as they did in the 1930s searching for "new species" or at least natural hybrids and species variants that were different than everything else?

And would the hippos have been content devouring just water hyacinths? Why not *giganticaeruleas* and *nelsoniis*? These species live in the wettest habitats.





*Color forms of I. giganteaerulea and I. nelsonii.  
Might we have lost these to munching hippos?*

Many of our modern hybrids come from *nelsonii* and *giganticaerulea*, so the range of variation we enjoy in our hybrids today might have been adversely affected. It would not have taken many hippos to decimate the plant life in the Abbeville Swamp and with it the only *I. nelsonii* in existence. Perhaps the *fulvas* and *brevicaulis* in the vicinity would have been safe, although hippos leave the water at night in search of vegetation and will roam up to five miles.

It feels like we had a close call. In the 1980s, the drug trafficker Pablo Escobar illegally imported only a handful of hippos into his private reserve in Columbia. Now they have multiplied and exist as a problem that scientists and officials are struggling to address.

#### **What Became of the Hippo Bill's Proponents?**

Cousin Bob Broussard was reelected to the House of Representatives several more times, but then was elevated to

the upper chamber. Senator Broussard died in 1918.

Major Frederick Burnham lived until 1947, and his final 37 years were filled with accomplishments. Seven years after the first failure of HR 23261 and the inability of Broussard, Burnham, Duquesne, and others to organize a New Food Supply Society, Burnham had turned to other causes and pursuits. He became a leader in the Preparedness Movement in advance of the looming World War and established copper mines and irrigation projects in Mexico. He introduced wild turkeys, peccaries, pheasants, and game bantams on his ranch in California's Sierra Mountains. During the War, Burnham, then in his mid-50s, could not participate as a soldier, and his skills as a scout were less valuable with a new kind of mechanized warfare. However, he found a way to join by scouting out domestic supplies of manganese, essential in making steel but in short supply because of the conflict and previous dependence on German imports.



The media had discovered Burnham and his military exploits in Africa, recognizing him as a war hero. The “chief scout” from the African campaigns became a model for the Boy Scout movement. Mooallem observed:

“Burnham was not only a longtime member of the group’s National Council but a model for the entire organization – the original Boy Scout. The group’s founder, the Englishman Lord Robert Baden-Powell, had been one of Burnham’s commanders in Africa and was so impressed by his friend’s integrity and ability that he aspired to build an institution to raise generations of similarly capable men. The Boy Scouts wore neckerchiefs because Burnham had always worn one in the desert.”

Along the way, oil had been discovered on Burnham’s property. He died at age 86, a wealthy and widely admired man.

Captain Fritz Duquesne’s life took a different turn. For a period, he engaged in several entrepreneurial schemes, and perhaps cons, to capitalize on the notoriety of Teddy Roosevelt’s Big Game Hunting expeditions to Africa. Eventually, his hatred of the British stemming from the Anglo-Boer conflict led him to become a spy and saboteur for Germany in both World Wars.

He used many aliases and guises, including, according to Mooallem, Frederick Barron, Colonel Bezin, F. Crabbs, Colonel Marquis Duquesne, Fred Buquesne, J. Q. Farn, Berthold Szabo, Von Goutard, Vam Dam, and Frederick Fredericks.

“As Fredericks, Duquesne hung out in bars, sidling up to drunk English sailors and offering them bribes to carry rare orchid bulbs to his friends and relatives abroad. But the packages contained explosives; Duquesne would later claim to have sunk 22 ships and started 100 dock fires during this time.”

In 1917, Duquesne was arrested for insurance fraud, of all things. However, the British were aware of his activities as a saboteur and sought to extradite him. He faked a months-long mental illness in custody and eventually escaped from Bellevue Hospital just days before he was due to be shipped to England.



### The Duquesne Spy Ring

Duquesne remained at-large and active for years. Finally, in 1941, after two years of FBI surveillance – of tailing Duquesne on the streets of Manhattan and orchestrating meetings between him and a double-agent in a bugged office in Times Square – the government arrested him as the leader of a 33-person Nazi spy syndicate.

J. Edgar Hoover bragged that the operation that led to his arrest as head of the so-called Duquesne Spy Ring was the most ambitious and well-executed spy roundup in American history, and it produced what is still considered the nation’s largest espionage case resulting in convictions. Duquesne was sentenced to 20 years in Leavenworth Federal Prison.

One could hardly imagine two more different individuals than Frederick Burnham and Fritz Duquesne. But there is one similarity. Both were imperialists. Neither appeared to have great regard for the native peoples or the native habitat of the places where their adventures occurred. Despite significant and admirable personal qualities, Burnham felt that neither Native Americans nor indigenous Africans mattered so much as his own vision of how a land should be transformed. Duquesne was both a colonialist and a scoundrel. His real beliefs, whatever they were, were mixed with megalomania and self-aggrandizement. And neither man recognized America’s wetlands as any more than wasted space. Neither exhibited a realistic, modern understanding or appreciation of the natural world.

Because the schemes that would have wrecked the irises’ natural habitat ultimately failed, we can safely enjoy this fascinating almost-story in our iris history. Hippos make nutria look better and better as iris companions. At least, nutria don’t weigh 6,000 pounds, although there are a heck of a lot more of them.

One other lesson one might take from this episode: We should always be alert to the possibility that anyone messing with our irises might turn out to be a Nazi spy.

## **BROUSSARD-DUQUESNE WILD ANIMAL PLAN IS EXPLAINED**

*On March 24, 1910, five months after Congressman Broussard's hearing on the Hippo Bill, the New Orleans Item published excerpts from an article provided by Captain Fritz Duquesne. Duquesne represented himself as a "field officer" of the New Food Supply Society, a lobbying organization being built to support reintroduction of the Hippo Bill after it failed to pass in 1910. Duquesne's comments – hyperbole and all – represent the manner in which he and others were promoting the "plan to raise the hippopotamus, the giraffe, the camel, the yak, the llama and other alien animals in this country." The emphasis was on Louisiana, but also in all "lands at present unoccupied and unused."*

"When selecting species for introduction, it is very important that their food supply be taken into consideration. What struck me in Louisiana was the vast area of lifeless, dismal swamp and marsh land – six million four hundred thousand acres of it, that would with proper care produce one million tons of meat per annum, worth one hundred million dollars. To do that it would be necessary to place a herd of hippopotami in the swamps and bayous and breed them as we now breed cattle. Some of the swamp land can be drained and is now being drained, but that makes very little difference, for there is a great deal of it that cannot be drained at any reasonable cost. The rivers are overgrown with millions of tons of water hyacinth and other aquatic plants which are the natural food of the hippopotami. They will eat other food, but prefer the water plant to anything else.

### **Hippopotamus Meat Good**

"The hippopotomus, as anyone who has traveled in Africa knows, is very good eating. The flesh tastes something between pork and beef. It is highly esteemed by whites and natives alike. It is known among the Boers, who were the first whites to eat it, as Zee Koe Speck (seacow bacon) when it is cured. The hippopotamus is practically the beef of Africa.

### **Would Destroy Water Hyacinths**

"Thousands of dollars are spent monthly on machinery, chemicals and experiments for the destruction of the costly and useless pest. So far every scheme and plan adopted by the State has been a failure and the hyacinth goes victoriously on, choking the streams of the land, impeding the development of industry and agriculture, and preventing navigation; proving a tremendous loss to the river shipping.

"Owing to a great increase in the number of cases of sickness in the districts adjacent to the watercourses, the New Orleans Department of Health made an investigation and found that the trouble was due to the pollution of the waters by millions of decaying fish rotting under the pestiferous water-lily, which caused their death. The stench arising from these dead fish made it almost impossible to stay in the vicinity of the rivers during warm days. The fish are destroyed by the absorption of the oxygen in the water by the hyacinth, which causes them to suffocate.

"A hundred hippopotami in the hyacinth-infested swamps and rivers would do more to remove the hyacinth than all the chemicals and dredges in Louisiana, and at the same time provide a valuable food for the country.

### **Not Dangerous**

The animal is not dangerous, as any menagerie keeper will testify. At one time the Khedive [Viceroy] of Egypt had a herd of tame hippopotami in his palace gardens on the side of the Nile, where they would romp and sport and flop into the water, never leaving their own feeding grounds. These gardens were open to the public. Of course, the animal does get wild, as any other animal would, after half a dozen amateur hunters have wounded it with express bullets.

"Another animal that would add to the wealth of the swamp and the food supply of the country is the Cape Buffalo, a fine flesh animal, whose leather is far superior to ox hide and which does not take pneumonia, as did the domestic cattle that were placed on the Louisiana marshes to graze.

"The wart-hog would also live well in the swamps and prove good food, as would the sitatunga, the bushbuck, the usunu, the reedbuck and the waterbuck, all living more or less on aquatic plants, and, with the exception of the last, making good meat and leather, the waterbuck, being good only for leather. These are eight animals that would grow where nothing is now produced but malaria, and add to the national wealth. The wonder is that they are not there already. These remarks apply to all the swamp lands of the country."