

The Wild Animal Hoax

AWFUL CALAMITY.

The Wild Animals Broken Loose from Central Park.

TERRIBLE SCENES OF MUTILATION.

A Shocking Sabbath Carnival of Death.

On Monday morning, November 9, 1874, the *New York Herald* reported to shocked readers that the animals housed in Central Park Zoo were prowling the city's streets, mauling and devouring citizens. The vivid full-page article described a "bloody and fearful carnival."

The great escape began when a zoo keeper teased a rhinoceros. Enraged, the rino burst out of its cage and "plunged blindly" into other cages, setting the most dangerous animals free.

The rampaging rhino trampled a zoo attendant, attacked a group of young girls, "gored a horse" on 19th Street, and continued to terrorize the public until falling into a sewer.

Other animals followed the shrieking and scurrying crowds into the streets. A leopard killed a child and mutilated several women. A lion horrified a church congregation, killing an elderly woman. A tiger pounced onto a ferryboat docked at 29th Street, causing the horses and carriages to plunge into the water, "dragging their human loads with them."

Three regiments of the National Guard, the police, and the mayor were unable to restrain the animals. General Chester A. Arthur prepared a crusade against the beasts. Governor John A. Dix shot a tiger on Madison Avenue. Whitelaw Reid, of the *Times*, and Charles Dana, of the *Sun*, were said to have already donated \$50 each for the victims.

At least 200 men, women, and children were reported as dead or maimed, and the article listed more than twenty by name.

Twelve of the "wild, carnivorous beasts" were "still at large" the next morning. A proclamation from the mayor urged citizens to stay inside their homes.

Readers panicked. Rushing home from



The cartoonist Thomas Nast lampooned the *New York Herald* and its owner, James Gordon Bennett Jr., for months after the wild animal hoax. In the cartoon above, he criticized Democratic papers as wild animals escaping from a zoo. In the cartoon on the left, he satirized Bennett as a promoter of insane causes. *Harper's Weekly* published cartoons about the hoax for more than a year.

seph I. C. Clarke crafted the gruesome account.

The public was upset at the stunt. Critics charged the *Herald* with being irresponsible and malicious.

A brief explanation in the *Herald* the next day rationalized that the intent was to highlight safety issues at the zoo. Yet the reason was not good enough to console angered members of the press.

The *New York Tribune* urged the arrest of the *Herald* reporters. The *Times* denounced the "heartless newspaper hoax." The *Sun* condemned it as "unfeeling, cruel, heartless" and labeled it "a mere piece of stupidity." The papers claimed that the hoax not only damaged the integrity of the *Herald* but also detracted from journalism as a whole.

Today, the "wild animal hoax" is known as one of the most outrageous – and interesting – a newspaper ever perpetrated.

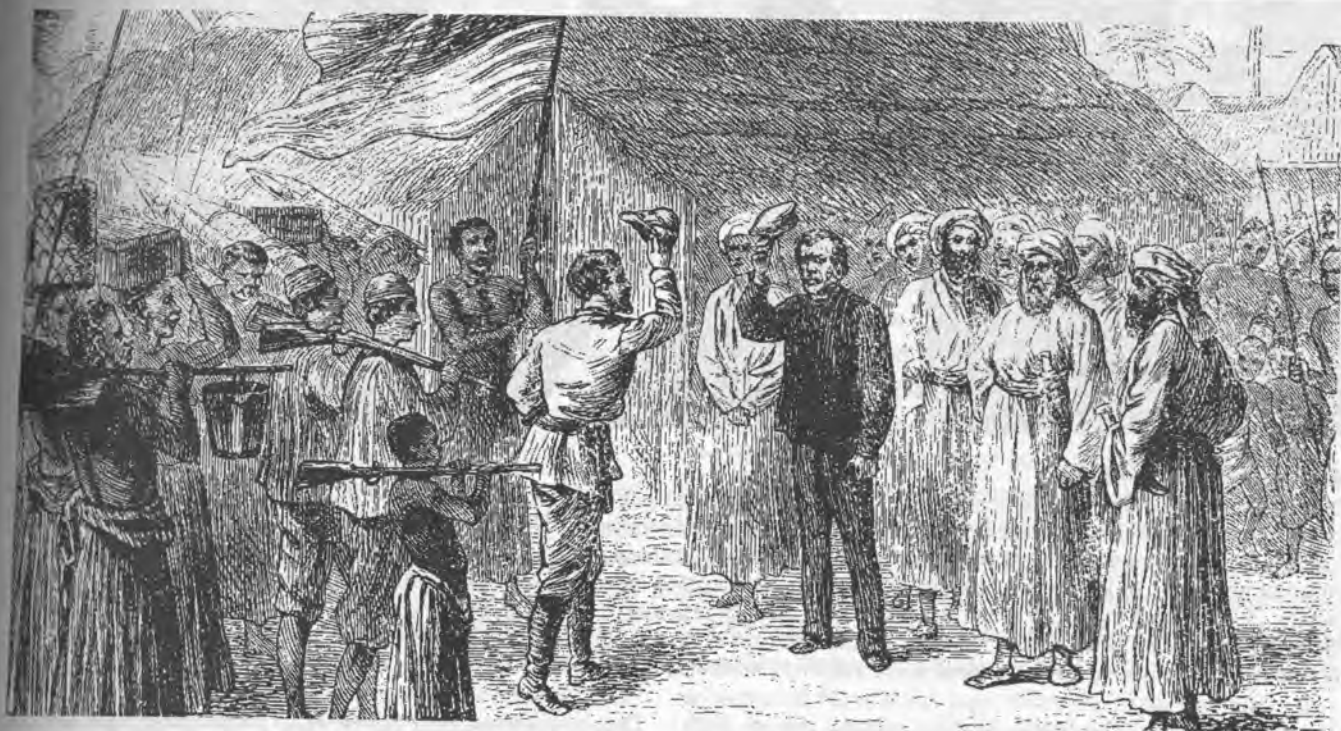
Lisa M. Varisco
University of Alabama

work, men armed themselves and stalked the streets, hoping to kill the animals. Parents pulled their children out of school.

Most were so excited that they did not read the article through to the end. Had they done so, they would have learned that it was nothing more than a prank. "Of course," readers would have found out, "the entire story given above is a pure fabrication. Not one word of it is true.... It is a huge hoax ... a wild romance...."

Thomas Connery, the *Herald's* editor, came up with the idea, and reporter Jo-

Stanley Finds Livingstone



To increase circulation and advertising, newspapers began to rely on "big news" and "stunts." The most successful in the 1870s was Bennett's *New York Herald*. The biggest stunt was reporter Henry Morton Stanley's search for the "missing" missionary doctor David Livingstone in southern Africa. Stanley's final story in his account ended with the famous words, "Dr. Livingstone, I presume?"

Epic Adventure Ends with History's Most Famous Greeting

The *New York Herald's* publisher gave correspondent Henry Morton Stanley a two-word assignment in October 1869: "Find Livingstone." The veteran reporter barely survived the search.

British missionary and medical doctor David Livingstone had disappeared four years earlier in East Africa's equatorial jungles. Known for his good works and books about the largely unexplored African continent, Livingstone was a Victorian Era celebrity. But rumors now circulated among the enclaves of Europeans on the African coast that cannibals had killed him. Finding Livingstone, dead or alive, would help the *Herald* maintain the preeminence earned by its Civil War coverage, reasoned publisher James Gordon Bennett, Jr.

He ordered the *Herald's* star reporter to work his way to Africa. Late in 1869, Stanley covered the Suez Canal opening and spent 1870 filing stories from the Middle East and North Africa. Starting from the island of Zanzibar early in 1871, he sailed to

the southeast African coast and began his trek toward Livingstone's last known camp more than 600 miles inland on Lake Tanganyika. During his 236-day journey, he contracted malaria and lost forty pounds. He also participated in a war between Arab traders and Africans that delayed his expedition for months.

But two years and twenty-four days after receiving his assignment, Stanley finally reached the object of his search and asked the question that would link him forever with one of the great scoops of journalism: "Doctor Livingstone, I presume?"

Stanley spent four months with the doctor before returning to Zanzibar. Livingstone died a year after they parted, and Stanley served as one of his pallbearers during a Westminster Abbey funeral. He returned to Africa to take up Livingstone's exploration work.

He conducted other African expeditions, but his relationship with Bennett soured. The publisher often noted that Stanley might have found Livingstone, but Bennett paid for the trip.

Randall Scott Sumpter
Texas A&M University