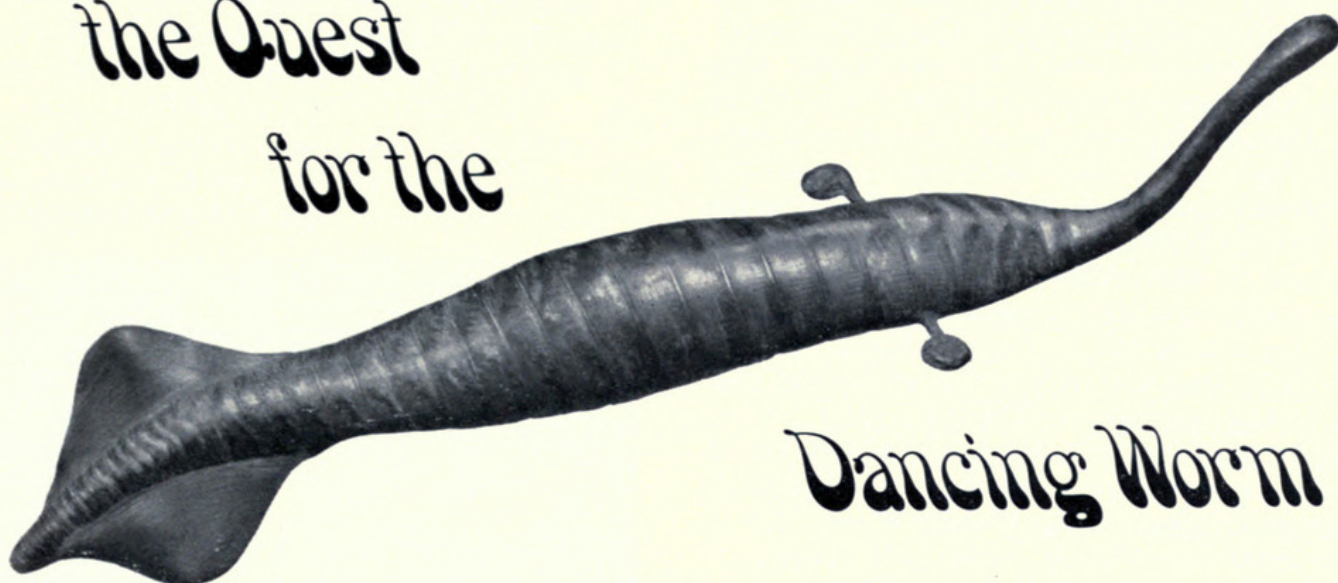


the Quest for the



Dancing Worm

by Edward G. Nash, Managing Editor

Mr. JAMES HOOKS, who delivers the mail at Field Museum, has delivered many thousands of interesting, curious—even bizarre—letters and packages over the years. Field Museum scientists are called to give advice in many fields, some of them quite unexpected. Hymen Marx, Associate Curator of Reptiles and Amphibians, for instance, recently gave some advice to a young lady employed as a “Go-go” dancer in Texas. The lady used a Boa Constrictor in her act. She wanted to know how to tame it and keep it from biting. Mr. Marx was able to recommend a popular book on snakes by a former staff member, Clifford Pope, and also suggested that a reticulated python, which “will reach coverage size, and has a much milder and gentler disposition,” would be a better candidate for work in the performing arts.

Articles in the BULLETIN often prompt letters of great interest, and few have provoked more comment than a story by Eugene Richardson, Curator of Fossil Invertebrates, called “The Tully Monster” (BULLETIN, July, 1966). Richardson told of a worm-like fossil of uncertain relationships which had been found in the Pennsylvanian (280 million years old) deposits of Mazon Creek, Illinois. He had previously described it scientifically in the weekly journal *Science*, with an official name, *Tullimonstrum gregarium*, named for Francis Tully, Lockport, Illinois, who had brought in the first specimen. It was such a strange animal that the author was unable to assign it to a phylum, which disturbed his sense of order—it would upset any systematic biologist.

The animal ranged in size from 2¼ to 14 inches, “at one end of the dirigible-like body was a spade-shaped tail;

from the other extended a long, thin proboscis with a gaping claw; across the body near the base of the proboscis was a transverse bar with a little round swelling at each end, outside the body.”

The response to this little animal, which may have eaten fossils so indistinct that Richardson could not even assign them to a kingdom and simply termed them “Blobs,” was immediate and extensive. Many of Gene Richardson’s friends took the time to write with helpful comment. One doctor noted the Tully Monster’s “impish benevolent, almost Schmoo-like, expression on its cuddly frame.” Another correspondent insisted that Gene had the animal backwards, and that what appeared to be fins on the tail were in actual fact ears on the head. “This view is reinforced by the obvious resemblance of *Tullimonstrum* to a certain black dog I know who has ears like that.” A Norwegian woman pointed out that the whole thing sounds funny to Norwegians because “tull” means “nonsense” in that language.

One of the most interesting exchanges was with Mr. F. W. Holiday, of Pembrokeshire, Great Britain. Mr. Holiday has been a student of the Loch Ness Monster for more than thirty years. He has watched the Loch Ness Monster become, from what appeared at first to be myth, the object of serious scientific research. Mr. Holiday wrote, “I think I was the first to suggest (*Field* magazine, 1st. Nov., 1962) that the Loch Ness Monster was probably an invertebrate. Last year I narrowed the gap still further by stating my belief that the LNM was a worm—a view which I still hold.”

Holiday enthusiastically suggested a close relationship between Loch Ness Monster and *Tullimonstrum*. Richardson replied that a time lag of 280 million years and a difference in size of one foot (TM) versus 40 feet (LNM) made such a relationship unlikely.

The correspondence provided Gene Richardson with a close view of the present state of the Loch Ness Monster. Holiday clearly thinks it a worm. Professor Mackal of the University of Chicago is inclined to the idea of a very large mollusc. There is still support for the sea snake, and other vertebrate, explanations. The Adventurers' Club of Chicago has provided support for some of the research on the monster. Holiday himself says he has seen the thing four times in a span of sixteen weeks at the Loch. He also mentions some strange creatures living in the Loughs of western Ireland, being investigated by Captain Lionel Leslie, a cousin of Sir Winston Churchill. Holiday remains convinced of a relationship between TM and LNM.

In early September of 1966, Mr. James Hooks delivered the first of a series of letters which were to launch Gene Richardson on the Quest for the Dancing Worm. It was an airletter, postmarked Nairobi, Kenya, and it read:

1/9/66

P. O. Box 30009

Dear Dr. Richards:

Nairobi

A recent issue of the East African Standard contains an illustrated article describing a curious prehistoric creature you discovered. This jogged my memory, carrying me back some forty years, of a tale I once heard that may be of some interest.

In 1926 having been seconded to the Kings (now Kenya) African Rifles from the Indian Army, I was in northwestern Kenya dealing with some border incidents. Passing through the administrative centre of Lodwar on my return journey, I took the opportunity of calling upon Mr. A. M. Champion, then D. C. Turkana District. In addition to being a keen shikar, Champion was a naturalist of the first rank, and during the two evenings I passed in his company he regaled me with many a fascinating yarn about the fauna of the area. Among these was one about a remarkable worm reputed to live in the swamp country to the southeast. The local tribesmen told fantastic stories about its dancing and giving milk, if I remember correctly. Such nonsense aside, Champion did give me a description of the creature which he had obtained from various natives (he never succeeded in getting a specimen) and this curiously enough has remained in my memory when much else has been forgotten. His account agreed remarkably well with the illustration of your "Tully Monster," even to the "paddles" and the long snout. Your mention of sharp teeth, incidentally, does agree with a

Turkana tale that the creature bites. On this account they are deathly afraid of it, believing that it is poisonous. But then nearly all natives believe everything of the creeping or crawling kind to be venomous.

I hardly dare to suggest that a relation of your extinct "Monster" still survives in one of the remotest parts of East Africa, but it might just be worthwhile to pursue the matter.

Yours faithfully
R. G. L. Cloudesley
(Lt.-Colonel, ret.)



Artist's impression of *Tullimonstrum* in its natural habitat. (Drawing was used as cover of the July, 1966, BULLETIN.)

Richardson's original BULLETIN article had already been picked up by a Boston newspaper for its Sunday Supplement; now, it appeared, the story had also been used in the *East African Standard*, perhaps the best known newspaper in the countries of former British East Africa. We began to hope it would make the *Straits Times* in Singapore, as well. What world coverage! As happens in many newspapers on rare occasions, the facts were a little bit garbled, and the author's name appeared as Dr. Richards, of Field's Museum. A forgivable mistake.

Intrigued and flattered by the attention, Richardson was penning a reply to Colonel Cloudesley (ret.) when a second airletter arrived, postmarked Nakuru, Kenya. Nakuru is a town about a hundred miles northwest of Nairobi on the Uganda Railway. Turkana District, Gene learned from the *Times Atlas*, is more than 400 air miles north-northwest of Nairobi on the Kenya-Sudan border. The letter was written in an even, graceful hand suggestive of the mysterious East. It read:

P. O. Box 568
Nakuru

Honoured Sir:

13 September 1966

I have now seen in an old copy of the Standard

the account of a wonderful monster you have found in your country. Sir, I believe that it also lives here in Kenya! My cousins Aowind and Manu have often told me of the dancing worm of Turkana, and what they say is very like your article. What triumph it would be to catch one.

Turkana is far from here and full of naked men with spears, but my uncle Motibhai has a duka business there, and his sons, my cousins, adventure with lorries into that savage land. With their help I, even I, might catch one for you. The price would be very cheap. But, Honoured Sir, tell me how I catch it as it lives in a great swamp. This is a new thing for me. Do I keep it, do I kill it. I await eagerly your orders and instructions.

Believe me, honoured Sir,
Your hopeful servant
Purshottam S. Patel

Richardson's interest grew. Was there something in all this? He began to consult some expert opinion. Alan Solem, Curator of Lower Invertebrates (living) knew of no such animal in the area, but it certainly wasn't impossible. The area has been little studied. And unknown species of animals continually turn up all over the world. Certainly size was no problem. There is a leech in southeast Asia which grows to a foot and in northern Queensland, Australia, there is a worm which varies in length from eight to twelve feet, as it contracts and expands.

Replies went off to Cloudesley and Patel. A few discreet inquiries were made to friends and associates who might have some knowledge of the area. It was clear that Mr. Patel had dollar signs in his eyes and was looking out for Number One. The Indian small businessmen of East Africa tend to be fairly hard-headed, however, so Patel might be on to something. Weeks went by with no news. Finally, a letter arrived. It had been posted September 13, but had traveled by surface mail.

Lokori
P. O. Kampi ya Moto
via Nakuru

Dear Sir: 9 September 1966
I must ask your pardon for writing to you, a stranger, which happens in this way. I am temporary teacher at the intermediate school here where I teach elementary English among other things. Whenever I can I show the pupils newspapers which is not often as this is a far away spot. The other day I was lucky to get a Sunday Standard which is bigger and often has repeats from English and American papers. The class was soon in a buzz and I heard repeated a Turkana word which means dancing worm roughly. On looking I see an article and drawing about an animal found by you and the children say they

hear of it from their fathers. One pupil Akai, a bright boy, was so moved that he later brought me a letter for sending to you. He was so proud I had not heart to refuse and so enclose.

As regards the subject of the letter, I can say nothing. Most Turkana are very primitive people and have many tales in which sometimes is a grain of truth.

Your faithfully,
Joseph N. Ngomo

Attached to the letter was a penciled note, in the painful crabbed style of a small boy, showing the same careful attention to spelling that all boys have:

Today techer show us paper and ther is annal
my pepels knows i not know name tuly moster
but call ekurut leodonkakini it live ayangyangi in
rains at moon fill all dance wave hands give
milk ekurut leodonkakini very dangery annal
bite man die

akai s/o [son of] ekechalon

As the testimonial evidence accumulated, Gene, and a number of others, myself included, became increasingly excited about the Dancing Worm of Turkana. More inquiries went out. A note was inserted in the Newsletter of the East Africa Natural History Society, asking local naturalists for information about the worm. No one, apparently, had ever heard of the legend except Richardson's four correspondents.

Touched by young Akai's note, Gene replied to both Ngomo and the little boy, and waited for an answer to his previous letters to Cloudesley and Patel. And as he waited, belief and hope grappled with reason and training. Was there a worm in the swamps of Turkana? The evidence was slim indeed: the word of four people of whom he knew nothing, and two were themselves dubious. On the other hand, the writers were from quite different walks of life, and were separated by many miles. Surely, what appeared to be a widespread folk tale might have some basis in fact.

The possibility of an expedition to search for the worm began to insinuate itself in conversations among staff members. The evidence was still far too tenuous to justify a field trip, but if more turned up, serious consideration would have to be given to the idea. The general feeling was one of cautious optimism.

That optimism received a blow when the letters to Cloudesley and Patel were both returned, stamped "Addressee unknown." But a second letter from Patel, indicating that he had moved and was still eager to be of service cleared up part of the mystery.

Box 6005
Rongai
2 August 1967

Honoured Sir,

I have been hoping so much to hear from you in answer to my letter but only silence has

come. But I venture to write again. One, because the post here has become very slack. Only last month my cousin Motilal nine years senior in Posts and Telegraph got the sudden sack and was substituted by an inexperienced person. Oh, Sir, these days are hard for us. Your eagerly expected letter may have come and got lost. I have now you see moved.

Two, because I hear that in a little paper a man Solem asks news of the worm. Sir, there is now a rival and you should beat him. I am always you know ready to help. I think the time is good for the worm. There is much rain and the great swamp is full. With your instructions we might get one.

Believe me honoured Sir,
Your hopeful servant,
Purshottam S. Patel

Next a letter came from Joseph Ngomo, who could no longer help, but whose evident dedication to his students should be a fine example of the new spirit of Africa.

P. O. Box 1432
Gilgil, Kenya
23 February 1967

Dear Sir,

I thank you for your kind letter of 18 November which has taken so long time to catch me up. I can no longer be of help for you with the dancing worm as I am transferred from Lokori and will I hear soon be transferred also from here. As a senior teacher I am moved about where needed and moved on again when things

are going well.

Before I left Lokori Akai had gone as far as was possible for him in the school. His family has no money for further education and he is with his father's goats again. This is sad for a teacher but Akai knows more than his father and his son will know more again and so we build. Harambee!

I am sorry your name was wrong in my letter but so it was in the paper. This time you see I use air letter.

Yours faithfully,
Joseph N. Ngomo

A most welcome visitor to Field Museum was able to add a tiny bit of corroboration. Bryan Patterson, formerly Curator of Vertebrate Paleontology at Field Museum, and now Agassiz Professor of the same at Harvard University, stopped to see his former associates early last year. Patterson, who had been in Kenya recently on field work, which resulted, incidentally, in some remarkable discoveries about hominid evolution, knew of Patel's uncle, whom he considered something of a rascal. A witty and charming man, he read the letters with delighted interest but he had never heard of the Dancing Worm of Turkana.

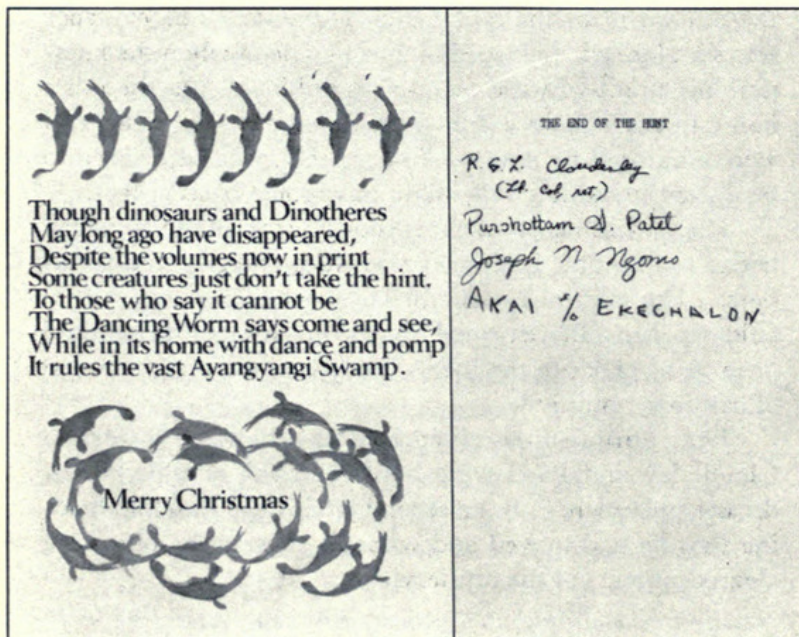
Professor Patterson had every reason to be delighted with the letters, for they represented a job well done. There were perhaps ten people in the Paleontology lab as he read the letters, but only one man knew that the letters had sprung from the same hand, their writers from a single brain, and that the Worm inhabited not the Ayangyangi Swamp but a similar habitat, the mind of Professor Bryan Patterson.

The collective leg of Field Museum had been thoroughly pulled. The hoax, admitted finally by a geologist in Patterson's confidence, although not yet by the author himself, was elaborate, satisfying and structurally magnificent. The delicate weave of hint and doubt, of fact and myth, of virtue and vice in the correspondents is convincing, but, in the final analysis, Patterson's greatest ally was the human will to believe. All of us wanted a Dancing Worm. We will miss it.

In fact, we will miss all of them—Colonel Cloudesley, in the sunset of a distinguished military career; the acquisitive Indian merchant, Mr. Patel; the devoted school teacher, Joseph Ngomo, and bright little Akai, back with his father's goats. But most of all, the Worm, who danced with waving arms by moonlight in the depths of the swamp, who gave milk, whose bite killed men. We mourn its passing.

One final message closes out the file: A card came to Gene Richardson last Christmas. On the cover was a photo of a well-known Agassiz Professor of Paleontology looking with obvious distaste at a Dancing Worm, which he has clearly just bagged with the shotgun in his hand. Inside the card, a short verse and a page headed "The End of The Hunt" and signed by our old friends.

The end of the hunt, yes. But not the end of the season. It is now open season on Mr. Bryan Patterson.



Above, "Christmas Greetings."

This month's Cover shows old Kenya hand Bryan Patterson and prey. He apparently bagged the little fellow with the shotgun in his right hand. Hunter Patterson brought down several Field Museum staff members with the same shot. The Editor of the Bulletin feels the Cover is appropriate for an issue published in April.



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