

Gorilla Researcher Has Humeston Connections

By Mary Ellen Stanley

Two doctors of veterinary medicine with Wayne County connections got together at Iowa State University in Ames, recently when Wildlife Researcher James W. Foster, Bellevue, WA, class of '54, returned to his alma mater as guest speaker in the Frank K. Ramsey lecture series.

Dr. Foster is the son of the the late Henry Foster, who grew up in Humeston. The grandparents, Fred and Adah Foster, were long time Humeston residents.

Dr. Ramsey is no stranger to this area either. The director of the ISU Achievement Foundation and for many years head of the department of veterinary pathology grew up in northern Missouri and also has family in Wayne County.

Dr. Foster returned to the United States in March after spending a total of 14 months in the tiny central African country of Rwanda, studying mountain gorillas.

The mountain gorilla is a race that has been forced into a high mountain habitat by human pressure. Through the centuries, it has adapted well, with long hair, a shorter arm length, and different food preferences.

There are no mountain gorillas in captivity. "The gorillas you see in zoos are western lowland gorillas," Dr. Foster explained.

In 1984 Dr. Foster began corresponding with Dian Fossey, the American who lived and worked among the gorillas for nearly 20 years until her brutal murder on Dec. 28, 1985.

Fossey indicated a need for a veterinarian to assist in training personnel to immobilize the gorillas for snare removal and treatment when they had been traumatized by poachers.

Since the gorillas are susceptible to human diseases, Fossey was also concerned that the tourists who visited the Parc National des Volcans to observe the gorillas would introduce diseases.

Research activities ceased following Fossey's death, but in Sept. 1986, with funding from the

Morris Animal Foundation of Englewood, CO, Dr. Foster and his wife, Jane, who took a leave of absence from her duties at Bellevue Community College, headed for Rwanda.

Their job was to make a medical evaluation of the status of the animals and to develop a program after the evaluation was completed.

In the meantime, the Rwandan government found an American research student, Wayne McGuire, guilty of Fossey's murder; however, before the trial, officials of the Rwandan government and the American embassy arranged to get him out of the country.

A Rwandan tracker, also convicted of the crime, reportedly committed suicide.

"Some agree with the verdict, and some disagree," was Dr. Foster's comment. He has been in contact with many of those who worked closely with Fossey.

A movie starring Sigourney Weaver as Fossey is scheduled for release this fall.

Karisoke, Fossey's camp, was reopened in the summer of 1987, and efforts are being made to restore it and develop it into an international research station.

Dr. Foster spent a lot of time in the forests observing the mountain gorillas and recording health related problems.

"The thing that impressed me the most," he recalled, "was it was like no other animal I'd ever worked with. Their behavior, the way they interacted with one another and with me was like visiting a form of early man."

Only 279 animals are left. About half of them have been habituated and can easily be approached by human visitors and researchers.

Four groups are used strictly for tourism, a big industry in Rwanda. Tour groups of no more than eight pay \$120 per person to visit the gorillas at distances of no less than four or five feet for one hour daily. Interaction with the animals is not

allowed because of the threat of disease or risk of injury.

Three groups of gorillas are for research only. Here, closer interaction is possible because the researchers have been isolated and quarantined.

"It's not unusual for a gorilla to come up and stare into your eyes, or even put his forehead directly on yours," said Dr. Foster.

"When a gorilla looks at you directly, it can mean aggression, but it's easy to recognize when there's no threat involved. They're just curious and interested," he explained. "The only other animal I've ever seen look at me in this way has been the whale."

The young males like to attract attention and encourage play with the members of the research group. Dr. Foster noted this can get quite rough because of the animal's size. Males can weigh up to 525 lbs.

Dr. Foster dispelled the myth that gorillas eat bananas. They're vegetarians, subsisting on a variety of wild plants, including thistles, nettles, celery, and bamboo.

He laughed, "If it's true you are what you eat, a gorilla would be a tossed green salad."

The average life expectancy of the mountain gorilla is 35 years, although some have lived into their 50's.

The park covers 110 square miles in the Virunga volcano area of Rwanda, Zaire, and a small portion of Uganda. Its boundary begins at an elevation of 8,000 ft., extending to the peak of the highest volcano, Mt. Karasimbi, at 14,700 ft.

Since the area is in the rain forest close to the equator, Dr. Foster said it is not unusual to see plants which have been domesticated and brought back to the U.S. He mentioned heather, which can be up to 30 ft. tall in Africa, compared to a foot or so here.

Jane Foster accompanied the tourist and research groups into the forests to observe the gorillas and assisted her husband in setting up and furnishing a small brick structure which was built to house the laboratory and their living quarters.

All supplies and furnishings were brought from the states. Paper towels, tape, pots and pans, and even peanut butter were among the many necessities that accompanied them, she recalled, as well as all the medical supplies.

They had to brush up on their French, the second language after the native tongue of Kenyaran. Very little English was spoken.

The Fosters made a weekly trip down the rough mountain road to Ruhengeri to collect their mail

and shop at the market.

There they bought tomatoes, macaroni products, coffee, and occasionally, eggs. Cheese could be purchased on the black market. "Something like a limburger smell, but meltable," Jane noted.

There was no milk, and meat was available at only one market. The owner had a tiny freezer, much smaller than home models, which contained pieces of beef and pork roasts, purchased in the capital city of Kigali.

Ordering and eating chicken was quite an experience, Jane recalled. "The chicken was literally chased down after it was ordered," she said, "and was so tough, probably from running for its life!"

Beans similar to our soup beans and potatoes were the dietary staples. Onions and pili pili, a hot pepper, were also abundant.

Their living quarters had water, collected in a tank from rain water running off the roof. Since it rained almost every day, this presented no problem.

Jane laughed as she remembered how acquaintances of hers, unfamiliar with Jim's work, were horrified to think she was going to Africa in the midst of a revolution. Telling them about the laboratory and medical supplies only encouraged their belief that she was talking about "guerillas" instead of gorillas.

Dr. Foster was staff veterinarian for the Woodland Park Zoological Gardens in Seattle, WA, for 14 years. During that time he initiated a rehabilitation program providing medical treatment for bald eagles who had been shot by hunters or were ill. They were then reintroduced into the wild.

For four seasons he studied the den site activities of the Alaskan gray wolf and also assisted in a caribou field study in Denali (formerly Mt. McKinley) National Park in Alaska.

Dr. Foster also worked with the Department of the Interior as a consultant with the mountain goat program in Washington's Olympic National Park.

His interest in gorilla diseases and reproduction, combined with a love for the mountains, led him to the mountain gorillas of Africa.

He has climbed Mt. McKinley in Alaska by a new route and, on several occasions, Mt. Rainier in Washington.

The Fosters' spirit of adventure has been passed on to their children. Jeff, the oldest, has just returned from spending six months relocating killer whales from Iceland to Japan while the youngest, Jonathan, an anthropology student,

spent a lot of time in Africa with his parents studying primitive cultures.

Jill is a housewife and the mother of the Fosters' first grandchild, with another baby due later this month. Julie is a flight attendant with Continental airlines.

In June Dr. Foster will return to Africa for a completely different project. He goes to Zaire to assist in preparing and disease testing okapis for air transport to the U.S.

The okapi is a relative of the giraffe that lives in the rain forests of central Africa. Dr. Foster describes them as shaped like a giraffe but much

smaller and gray in color. Since there are so few of them in the U.S., inbreeding is a concern, and several are being imported to provide new stock.

The animal is difficult to move and requires a great deal of veterinary care, explained Dr. Foster.

Meanwhile, back at the college of veterinary medicine in Ames, where student Jim Foster dreamed of one day working with exotic animals, Dr. Ramsey continues to give guidance and encouragement to the doctors of tomorrow, perhaps nurturing another future mountain gorilla researcher.

Editors note: the preceding article appeared in the "Humeston New Era" and the "Corydon Times Republican" in May of 1988. We would like to thank Ms. Stanley for permission to reprint it here.



Mingling with the mountain gorillas

Dr. Jim Foster, an Iowa-born veterinarian and wildlife researcher, interacts with two mountain gorillas in their native habitat. Foster spent 14 months in the tiny central African county of Rwanda, studying the health problems of the animals, of which only 279 remain.

Photo courtesy of Dr. J.W. Foster