

The Education of William McGrew



In a field camp in Senegal, McGrew gets a "grooming" from two chimps being rehabilitated from captivity to the wild.

Years in the wilds of Africa have brought him international acclaim as an expert on primates, but he still sees himself as a Sooner Boy Scout who began his career at the OU Biological Station.

By WILLIAM McKEEN

Continued

"A Teacher Affects Eternity; He Can Never Tell Where His Influence Stops."

—The Education of Henry Adams

Teachers have made a difference in William McGrew's life. There was his father, a University of Oklahoma accounting professor who inspired his son to pursue an academic career. There were two other OU professors—one of whom was McGrew's scoutmaster—who let the teenage prodigy work in their laboratories alongside graduate students. Then there was Jane Goodall, the internationally celebrated primate expert who helped start McGrew in his professional research career.

McGrew left OU 20 years ago to study at Oxford University on a Rhodes Scholarship. Since then, he has held a number of academic appointments and led several expeditions to Africa. Today, he is director of the primate unit at Stirling University in Scotland and ranked by publications such as *Smithsonian* as one of the world's leading authorities on primate behavior. For his success, McGrew modestly credits his parents, his OU faculty mentors and the experiences offered him as a boy at the OU Biological Station.

McGrew attended the old University School on North Campus and took advantage of a program there called "School Out-of-Doors," spending his summers auditing graduate classes at the OU Biological Station at Lake Texoma. Although just a high school student, McGrew performed as well—if not better—than most of the regularly enrolled graduate students.

Two members of the OU zoology faculty, Charles Carpenter and Cluff Hopla, took a special interest in McGrew's work.

"Charles Carpenter was easily the greatest influence on me as a high

school student and particularly as an undergraduate," McGrew says. "I worked in his lab on a Lew Wentz (scholarship). He made a difference."

Carpenter recalls meeting McGrew when he was 15 or 16, as one of the first participants in the zoology department's pre-college program. "Bill was sort of a protégé of mine. He worked at the Biological Station and took advanced courses in animal behavior. He wrote several papers, and I was impressed that he used better English than most of my graduate students."

In addition to the summers at the Biological Station, McGrew was tutored by Hopla, who was also scoutmaster of Boy Scout Troop 242. Campouts were more interesting in that troop because of Hopla's impromptu zoological lectures.

"I figured if I was going to take my time to be scoutmaster," Hopla recalls, "I wanted it to be productive. It was not going to be a whittling and storytelling group."

As McGrew remembers, "We had the natural history component in addition to just going camping."

Hopla's troop emphasized natural history and carried out numerous field projects. Not surprisingly, McGrew earned the rank of Eagle Scout, and when his medal didn't arrive in time for the Court of Honor, his mother borrowed Carpenter's Eagle medal to pin on her son. McGrew didn't elect to move up to an Explorer Scout unit, however. He was one of a talented group of senior scouts who refused to leave Hopla's troop.

"I called them the old-timer's patrol," Hopla says. "I had them do a lot of projects on campus. They worked with faculty members in zoology, physics and chemistry. We got involved with a project with the law dean, too.

I wanted to do something that would challenge them intellectually."

The "old timers" remained close to Hopla. McGrew was an undergraduate in zoology during Hopla's tenure as chairman of the department, and support from Hopla and Carpenter allowed him to "participate fairly freely in anything he felt like doing," Hopla recalls. "We encouraged Bill as best we could. The important thing about Bill was that he had a uniquely good ability to work with people."

Hopla found his work with McGrew—as a teacher and a scoutmaster—rewarding. And the old timers patrol members turned out to have been a good investment of Hopla's time. In addition to McGrew, the patrol produced two other research scientists, an Apple Computer executive, a radiologist and a federal judge.

McGrew never doubted that he would pursue an academic career.

"Having come from an academic background, living in a university town and attending a university school, the academic lifestyle was always appealing," McGrew says.

Continuing to work with Carpenter and Hopla as an undergraduate, he earned his bachelor's degree in only three years. Then, in 1965, McGrew was awarded a Rhodes Scholarship to Oxford.

"The transition was pretty sudden," McGrew says. "I went from undergraduate to graduate, from one country to another, and from the American educational system to an educational system in another culture."

The city of spires did not remain an entirely foreign experience for long. McGrew impressed the Oxford dons, and after only a semester he found himself fitting into the English lifestyle. He made a number of friends, including another Rhodes Scholar and fellow basketball player Bill Bradley, who later joined the New York Knicks and was elected to the U.S. Senate from New Jersey.

McGrew's early research centered on very young children. "I was attracted to looking at children as an animal behaviorist looks at new species," he says. "I looked at them with few preconceptions."

The focus of McGrew's early studies of children was their "spacing behavior," observing how children keep their distance from each other.

"Kids don't behave in a random manner," McGrew claims. "They bounce around the room like molecules. That's the nice thing about looking at children at that age—they are spontaneous."

Two years after completing his doctorate at Oxford, McGrew published *An Ethological Study of Children's Behavior* (Academic Press, 1972). Although his children's studies were sort of a diversion in the early years of his research, McGrew found that work rewarding.

"One of the beauties of the period of early childhood," McGrew says, "is that children have not yet realized the ways in which they can mask their emotional state."

The next step in McGrew's research was the "logical development" of studying chimpanzees and monkeys. Again, he gives credit to a teacher.

"It was Jane Goodall who gave us our chance to do primate research in the first place," he says.

Goodall, the world's foremost authority on chimpanzees and great apes, hired McGrew and his associate Caroline Tutin to work at one of her camps in Central Africa. McGrew was one of Goodall's protégés, as she was herself a protégé of Louis Leakey, whose research produced evidence of the earliest human inhabitants of Earth.

The interest in primate research was a natural outgrowth of McGrew's studies of children. "Having looked at children for a number of years, I realized how many of their basic patterns were similar to those of our nearest relative, the great apes."

From the beginning of his first expedition to Africa, McGrew realized that it was for that experience that he had been preparing. "Since then," he says, "I've never looked back."

Well, maybe once. The first night in the field, McGrew was sleeping under the stars when he was awakened by a noise. He opened his eyes to see a lion strolling through camp. "I considered picking up everything and going home," he admits.

During his most recent trip, he was charged by an adult male gorilla, but



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As high schoolers, members of Scoutmaster Cluff Hopla's "old timers patrol" received an early indoctrination in the natural sciences. Hopla's son Richard, who earned his Ph.D. at Stanford and now is a research chemist with Ciba Geigy in New York, admires a snake draped around the neck of his friend Bill McGrew.



During spring break in 1963, OU sophomore Bill McGrew, second from left, joined zoology professor Charles C. Carpenter, far right, on the "Go Go Go Safari" to Chihuahua, Mexico, to collect lizards for behavior research. Other student members of the expedition shown here were Hal Merriman, left, and Jim Lloyd.

McGrew's love for the African experience is so deep that he has never again considered packing up and going home until his project was completed. "Africa gets in your blood," he says.

McGrew has made 10 trips to Africa, a total of about four years in the wild. Some of his trips last only a month; others last as long as eight months.

McGrew's African camps have ranged from grass huts with mud floors to "fairly luxurious" lodgings in the wild, complete with roofs and beds. To study chimpanzees, McGrew explains, it is necessary to live close to them and blend in with the environment. So a fairly primitive camp is needed. However, his present camp in Gabon—where graduate students hold the fort between his visits—is "actually quite good."

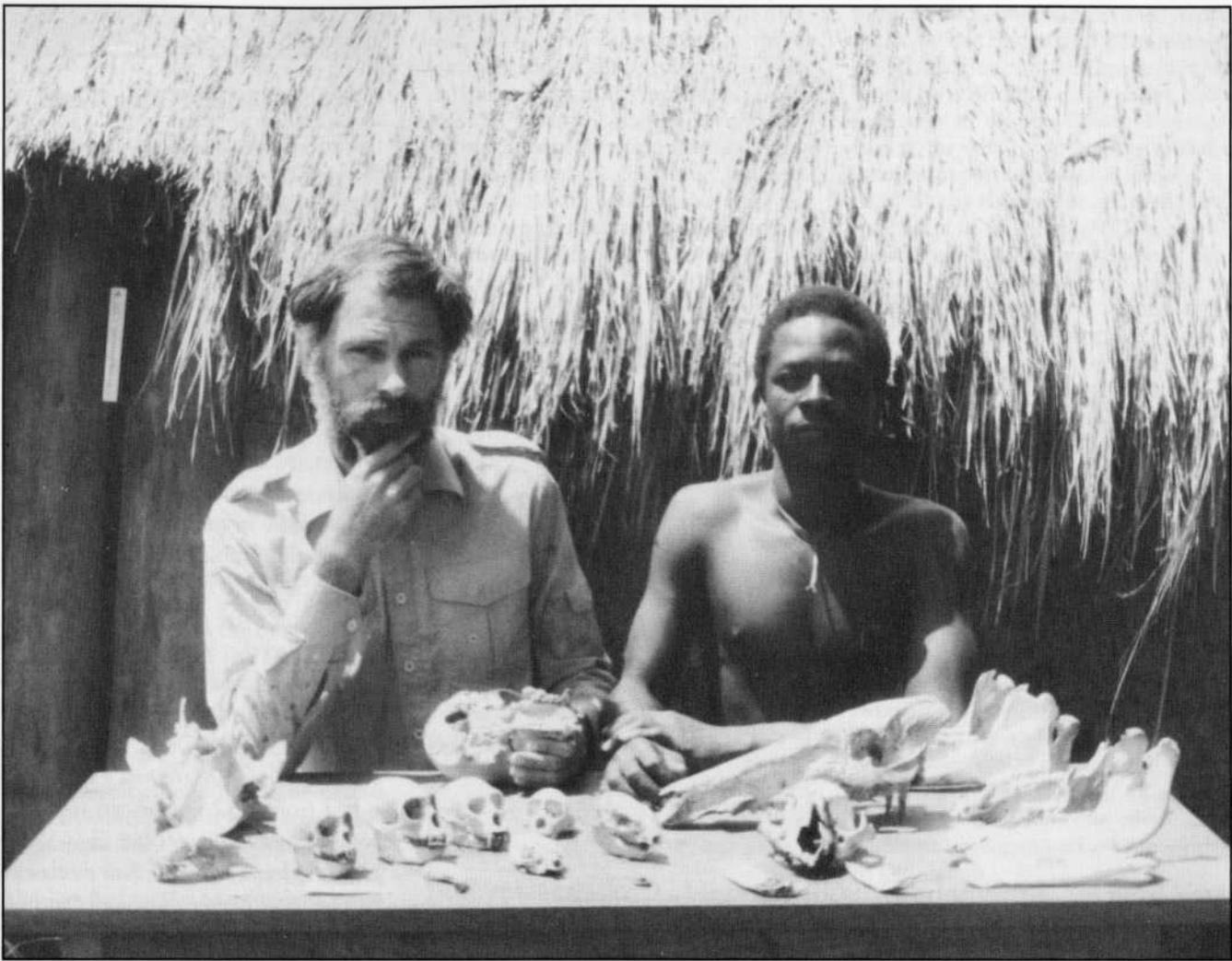
"They have a great dignity," McGrew says of his ape subjects. "Most of their daily life is quiet and considered. They don't spend their days jumping around. They are quiet, thoughtful and considerate creatures. In the wild, we see them as they really are. They approach life with a degree of complexity."

The longer he watches the apes, the more McGrew learns. "After 15 years, I feel that I'm still just beginning," he says.

McGrew and his research associates—principally Tutin—have worked in Tanzania and Senegal as well as Gabon. In addition, McGrew has worked with primate units at the Caribbean Primate Research Center in Puerto Rico and at Tulane, Stanford and the University of North Carolina.

While at Stanford in the early 1970s, McGrew conducted a series of research projects based on his observations of the ways in which chimpanzees take care of each other's teeth—cleaning and polishing their mate's chompers. According to *Newsweek*, McGrew "discovered . . . that captive chimpanzees are capable of conducting a thriving dental practice."

When not in the field, McGrew serves as director of the primate unit at Stirling University in northern Scotland. He averages a six-hour teaching load but still supervises the research of a number of graduate students—some working with the apes in the primate unit and some working in the field.



Studying primates in Africa requires living close to the subjects in field camps primitive enough to blend with the environment. In their camp in Tanzania, McGrew and his native field assistant study a collection of primate bones.

McGrew's bachelor's degree was in zoology, and his doctorate was in psychology. His research, however, has led him into anthropology, and he is working on a second doctorate in that field.

Stirling is a small (under 3,000 students) university that does not offer some of the opportunities McGrew had as a graduate student at Oxford. But that disadvantage is outweighed by Stirling's flexibility.

"It's more innovative," McGrew says. "I have more freedom than I would have at a larger university."

But there are things he doesn't like about the United Kingdom's elitist, rigid universities. "For years, I wanted to teach a course in the evolution of animal behavior. I couldn't get that through at Stirling. But when I went

to the University of North Carolina (as a visiting professor), they said, 'Well, what do you want to teach?'"

Though McGrew has had one-year appointments in the United States, he has lived in the United Kingdom off and on for 20 years. He tries to come back every 18 months or so, and he is always amazed by the changes in his hometown. And Norman is still his hometown.

During his home visits, McGrew's parents help satisfy their son's Sooner sports craving with videotapes of OU football and basketball games. He had scheduled his trip this fall around the OU/SMU game, originally slated for September 14, and was somewhat miffed that the game had been moved to December to guarantee a nationwide television broadcast.

McGrew has added British terms and pronunciations to his speech, and his wardrobe sometimes shows an African influence. He even has taken citizenship in his adopted United Kingdom. But he still considers himself just an older version of the Oklahoma boy who gloried in his summers at the Biological Station.

"I suppose I will always be an American in outlook," McGrew says. "I was imprinted here."

Part of that imprinting was due to his father and Carpenter and Hopla. McGrew never has forgotten what they did for him, and he finds himself filling a similar role with his own students now.

"I enjoy teaching undergraduates," he says. "I would never want a job that was just pure research." 