

= Billy (pygmy hippo) =

Billy , or William Johnson Hippopotamus , (1920s ? October 11 , 1955) was a Pygmy Hippopotamus given as a pet to U.S. President Calvin Coolidge . Captured in Liberia , he was given to Coolidge by Harvey Samuel Firestone in 1927 . Billy spent most of his life in the National Zoo in Washington D.C . In addition to his fame as an exotic presidential pet ? which afforded him a trip to the 1939 New York World 's Fair ? Billy is also notable as the common ancestor to most pygmy hippos in American zoos . By the time of his death in 1955 , Billy had sired 23 calves , 13 of whom survived at least a year .

= = Early years = =

In 1927 , Harvey Samuel Firestone , the founder of the Firestone Tire and Rubber Company , acquired Billy in Liberia , where he was captured on one of Firestone Tires ' large plantations . Calvin Coolidge , who was the U.S. President at the time , was known for his collection of animals , including many dogs , birds , a wallaby , lion cubs , a raccoon and other unusual animals . At the time , pygmy hippos were virtually unknown in the United States . On May 26 , 1927 , Coolidge was informed that he would receive the rare hippo , already adult @-@ sized at 6 feet (1 @.@ 8 m) long and around 600 pounds (270 kg) , as a gift .

In Coolidge 's autobiography he wrote about the unusual menagerie he collected and stated that he donated many of these animals , including Billy , to the National Zoo . Though Coolidge had a deep fascination with animals , he was overshadowed by Theodore Roosevelt , who was more widely known for and associated with his interest in animals . By August 1927 , Coolidge had sent the second largest collection of animals of any president after Roosevelt to the zoo , and paid them frequent visits . Upon his arrival , Billy was one of the most @-@ valuable animals the zoo had ever received , and was only the eighth pygmy hippopotamus to be brought to the United States . Billy was a popular animal ; several months after his arrival , The New York Times wrote Billy was " as frisky as a dog . Even the antics of the monkeys go unobserved when the keeper opens the tiny hippo 's cage and cuts up with him . "

= = Parenting troubles = =

Today , pygmy hippos breed well in captivity : since Billy 's arrival , 58 pygmy hippos have been born at the National Zoo alone . As one of the earliest pygmy hippos in captivity in the U.S. zoo system , Billy went on to become the direct ancestor of nearly all pygmy hippos in American zoos . When Billy first came to the zoo , however , keepers did not know much about pygmy hippopotamus husbandry . A mate for Billy , a female named Hannah , was acquired by the zoo on September 4 , 1929 . Billy 's and Hannah 's first calf was born on August 26 , 1931 , but did not survive the week . " Inability to survive the neglect of an errant mother was the cause given for baby Hippo 's demise " , eulogized The Washington Post . Over the next two years , two more calves would follow , both of which died in infancy . Billy 's third calf was killed when Hannah rolled on top of the baby and crushed it . " She 's just a bad mother " , said the zoo 's long @-@ time director Dr. William M. Mann to The Washington Post , upon the death of the third infant .

As Hannah 's fourth pregnancy progressed , zookeepers noticed she seemed to be less agitated than previous pregnancies and attributed this to their new quarters : during her previous three pregnancies , Hannah had lived in the zoo 's lion house , a stressful environment for a pregnant hippo . On Mother 's Day of 1938 , Hannah gave birth to a healthy baby .

= = Life as a stud = =

Such was Billy 's popularity in the 1930s that at the end of the decade he traveled to Queens , New York , for the 1939 New York World 's Fair , where he appeared in the Firestone exhibit . Billy and Hannah successfully had more calves , and because of Billy 's worth as a breeding stud , in 1940 ,

Mann traveled to Liberia as part of the Smithsonian @-@ Firestone animal expedition , and acquired a second mate for Billy , another female who came to be known as Matilda .

Between 1931 and 1954 , Hannah gave birth to 15 of Billy 's calves , 7 of whom were reared or lived at least one year . Between 1943 and 1956 , Matilda gave birth to 8 of Billy 's calves , 6 of which were reared . At some point during the 1940s , the press started to refer to Billy as William Johnson Hippopotamus . The zoo developed the tradition of naming all his calves Gumdrops , using Roman numerals to distinguish them . By the birth of Gumdrops XVI , the zoo had noticed something curious : of all Billy 's calves , only one was male . Research would later confirm that pygmy hippos in captivity are far more likely to give birth to females , though not by such an extreme ratio as Billy . Twenty @-@ three years after Coolidge 's death (January 5 , 1933) Billy himself died on October 11 , 1955 , five months before the birth of Gumdrops XVIII . " He carried his work on to the end " , said a zoo official . Hannah followed Billy in death on March 6 , 1958 .

= = A legacy continued = =

After a year or two at the National Zoo , Billy 's offspring were typically sent to other locations . Among the places to which his progeny were transferred : the Cole Bros. Circus , Philadelphia Zoological Gardens , Catskill Game Farm , the Miller Bros. Circus , the Fort Worth Zoo , as well as international destinations such as Sydney and London . In 1960 , after learning that the zoo 's female pygmy hippos remained without male companionship after Billy 's death , Liberian President William Tubman dispatched a search party to find a new male pygmy hippopotamus to ship to Washington . The pygmy hippopotamus , named Totota , arrived in Brooklyn , New York , on February 4 , 1960 , and traveled via station wagon to Washington the next day , where he would continue Billy 's breeding legacy with the zoo 's female pygmy hippos , two of which were Billy 's daughters .