



STAR OF THE CAST

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photos courtesy of the Martin and Osa Safari Museum, Chanute

Osa and Martin Johnson gained enormous fame producing exciting movies of their travels in the South Pacific. And while the camera often caught Osa hunting exotic or dangerous game, fishing may have been her first outdoor passion.

To say that Osa Johnson was a remarkable woman is an understatement. The petite, 5-foot, 2-inch beauty who was once named one of America's best-dressed women and always looked her best even in the wilds of Africa, was a crack shot and an expert fly angler. A small-town girl from a middle class family in Chanute, Osa eloped in 1910 at age 16 to marry Martin Johnson, an adventurer from Independence who was nine years her senior. Martin was full of ambition and wanderlust, already having spent time bumming across Europe and traveling the South Seas on the voyage of the Snark with novelist Jack London (*Call of the Wild, White Fang*).

For seven years, the couple toured the U.S. on the famous Orpheum vaudeville circuit, regaling audiences with tales, slide shows, and dramatizations of life in the exotic South Seas, sharing the spotlight with the likes of Will Rogers. During this time, they raised enough money for their first safari, during which Martin would exercise his considerable skills with both still and motion picture cameras. Their nine-month voyage to South Seas islands never visited by "civilized" man began in 1917 and was the first of many trips — some lasting as long as four years — over the next 20 years, the most spectacular being in Africa.

With Martin behind the camera and Osa in front — often facing dangerous big game, rifle in hand — the two

gave birth to the modern wildlife documentary. Their footage was so impressive that subsequent trips were sponsored by the American Museum of Natural History and George Eastman, of Eastman-Kodak camera fame. They made nine commercial movies and dozens of lecture films and shorts and rivaled the greatest film stars of their time in fame, if not for-

tune. And while audiences were held breathless by the wildlife and primitive tribes they filmed, Osa was the star attraction. Engaging and uninhibited with tribal peoples, the beautiful young woman from Kansas helped unveil western stereotypes of the "dark" parts of the planet. Ernest Hemingway somewhat grudgingly admits as much in his

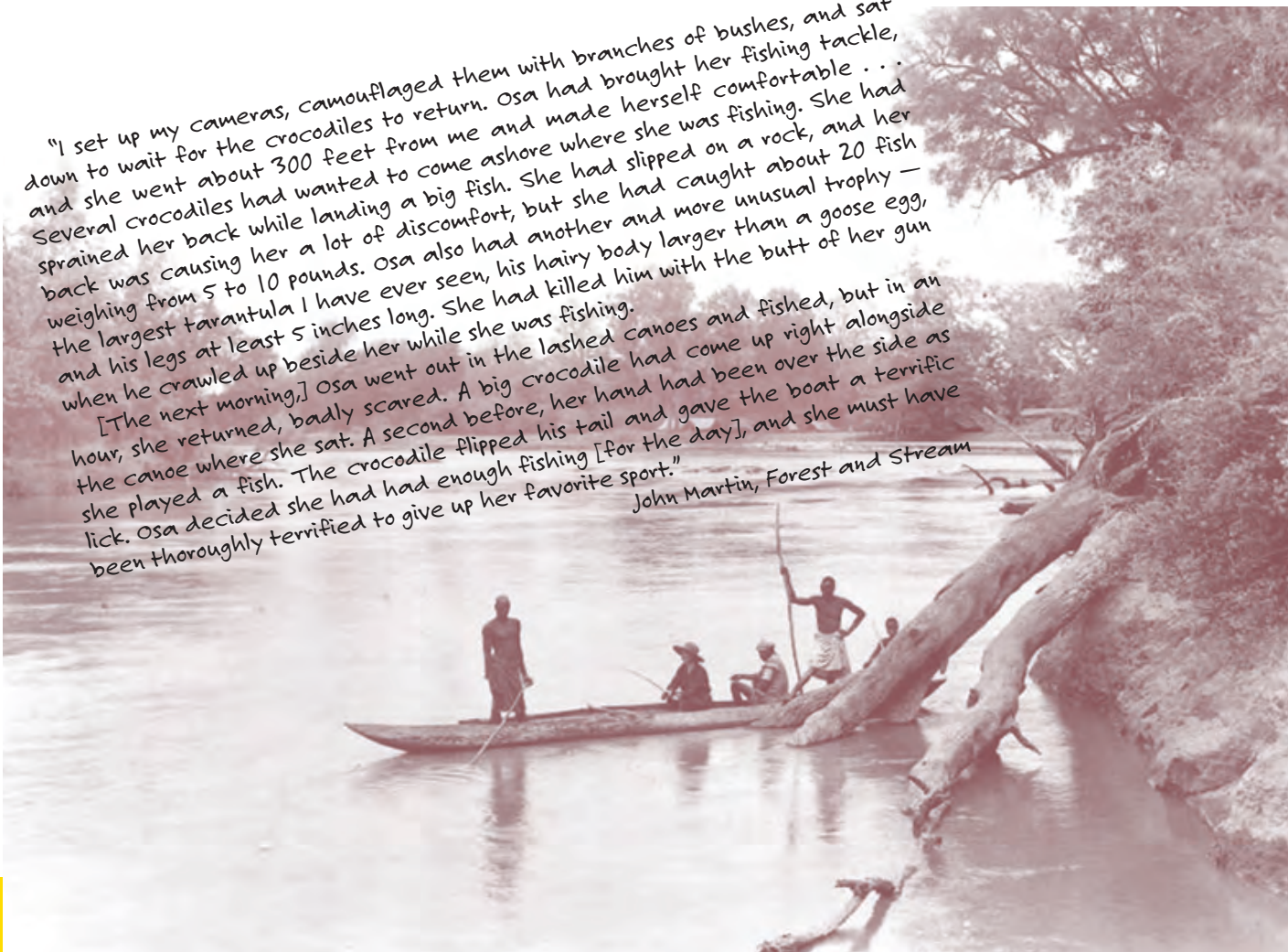


Osa with two trophies, weighing 5 and one-half pounds and 3 and one-half pounds, taken near Nanyuki, Kenya, during her "four years in paradise," 1924-1927.

"I set up my cameras, camouflaged them with branches of bushes, and sat down to wait for the crocodiles to return. Osa had brought her fishing tackle, and she went about 300 feet from me and made herself comfortable . . . Several crocodiles had wanted to come ashore where she was fishing. She had sprained her back while landing a big fish. She had slipped on a rock, and her back was causing her a lot of discomfort, but she had caught about 20 fish weighing from 5 to 10 pounds. Osa also had another and more unusual trophy — the largest tarantula I have ever seen, his hairy body larger than a goose egg, and his legs at least 5 inches long. She had killed him with the butt of her gun when he crawled up beside her while she was fishing.

[The next morning,] Osa went out in the lashed canoes and fished, but in an hour, she returned, badly scared. A big crocodile had come up right alongside the canoe where she sat. A second before, her hand had been over the side as she played a fish. The crocodile flipped his tail and gave the boat a terrific lick. Osa decided she had had enough fishing [for the day], and she must have been thoroughly terrified to give up her favorite sport."

John Martin, *Forest and Stream*



In 1933-1934, Martin and Osa undertook a flying safari of Africa, becoming the first to film African wildlife from the air. As always, Osa found ways to get away and fish, and her catches often fed their crew.

famous short story, "The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber," saying that Africa ". . . was known as Darkest Africa until the Martin Johnsons lighted it on so many silver screens."

Martin may have taken top billing on the marquee for their films, but on the screen and in the field, Osa put food on the plate — literally. Osa's mother had taught her to cook and sew, but her father had taught her to shoot, hunt, and fish. And although she became the first woman to be issued a big game hunting license in Africa,

fishing not only became what Martin once described as "her favorite sport," it proved an indispensable talent.

Everywhere they went, Osa — always in charge of food — fished not just to put food on the table for Martin and their often very large crews, but because she plain loved it. If she were compared to Annie Oakley as a crack shot (which she was), she likely had no female peer with a fly rod in hand. It was not unusual for her to return from a day's fishing with 50 to 100 pounds of fish for the crew.

Perhaps Osa's most productive time fishing came during four years the couple camped near Lake Paradise, in northern Kenya, from 1924 through 1927. During this time, it was not unusual for Martin to awake and find Osa already gone from camp, but she would soon return with fish for breakfast. While out filming, Osa would often take time to fish if they stopped near good water for lunch. One day, they had crossed a river but had to make camp and wait another full day for their wagons to catch up. Osa was up at the crack of

dawn and fished all the next day.

“When I weighed my catch that night, I found that I had more than 150 pounds. Of course, I was delighted,” she beamed.

Martin often worried about Osa going out in bush alone, without a gun bearer, following streams where lions or leopards might be lurking. But she was undeterred.

“My enthusiasm for fishing made me quite reckless,” she once admitted. “With or without waders, I would take long chances, and often I came home dripping wet. It seemed to me that Martin scolded me

more about coming home wet and late from fishing than for any other reason. The fishing ‘bug’ had never bitten him.”

Nonetheless, Martin often seemed more proud of her catches than she did. He spoke of her adaptation to their life of adventure glowingly, saying, “If ever a man needed a partner in his vocation, it is I, and if ever a wife were a partner to a man, it is Osa Johnson.”

Other than the crocodile episode, it seems that little stopped Osa from fishing. If she slipped on a rock and fell over her head in water, her reaction was simply, “That was the sport, and who but a fisherman

could understand?”

Once, she had caught about 30 pounds of fish that a native helper was carrying back to camp for her. As they crossed a stream, both slipped, and the fast-moving water carried them toward a waterfall. The native dropped the fish but rescued Osa. Once safely on the bank, she started to scold the native over the loss of the fish before she realized that he had saved her life.

Given her passion for angling, this time in Africa must have seemed, as the title of one of her books implies, like four years in paradise. “There are so many fish in Africa, run-



This photograph shows Osa in 1933 with a large creel of trout taken from the clear streams of Mt. Kenya. Trout were stocked by the British government and were plentiful while the Johnsons' were in Kenya.

"The trout love gay-colored flies, for the insects of Africa are brilliant-hued. Most of the flies we use at home for salmon can be used in Africa for trout: the Darum Ranger, Silver Doctor, Jock Scott, Alexandra, all gave me great fishing, and I took my poundage records on number six hooks with a 3 and one-half-ounce Hardy rod.

The streams are crystal clear and cold, most of them tumbling down from high altitudes, the Mount Kenya streams coming directly from glaciers at the top. So I dyed my leaders green to make them invisible."

ning in great schools, that at times the water seems almost solid with fins and tails," she wrote. "It looks as though one could walk on them."

In this part of Africa, Osa even found trout, much to her delight. The English government had stocked rainbow and brown trout in the rivers near Nanyuki, and Martin would often drive Osa up river, so she could fish her way down. It was a familiar pursuit for such a seasoned angler. "I always fish with flies," she wrote, "for it is more sporting and more fun." And she readily adapted her techniques to the African environment.

At the time of the Lake Paradise expedition, the streams were so over-stocked that the provincial government encouraged large catches, which Osa undertook with relish. On occasion, she would take as many as 15 fish from a single pool and come back the next day for an equally large creel. Within 130 miles of Nairobi, in every direction, Osa described streams that "any critical fisherman would



Osa took this strange-looking fish on an outing during the Johnson's four years on Lake Paradise. Martin often worried about Osa because she would often fish through the day and return to camp late in the evening.

call ideal." She would catch as many as 60 pounds of brown trout in a single morning and once took 148 trout in a single day. While this seems extreme by today's conservation standards, one must consider that these streams had been overstocked, and the fish thrived in rivers that few people fished at the time.

Osa often spotted a lazy trout loafing before it saw her, and in this situation, she was deadly. "One whip cast, dropping fly under his nose, and the trout was mine," she wrote. She caught her record rainbow in this area, a 13 and one-half-pound monster.

But Martin never got the knack. One day, she found him chasing grasshoppers because he couldn't catch a thing on his artificial fly. Just to tease him, she said that he "didn't hold his mouth right," and grabbed his

rod and caught a trout on her second cast. Although she knew it was just luck, Martin proudly repeated this story to friends.

It must have been heart-breaking for Osa to leave this place. Often, their cook would meet them at a predetermined spot after a day of fishing. As she described one such evening, "There he was, with a fine fire and a heap of coals all ready, and when the others came up, my trout were in the pan.

"We sat there, in the cool crisp evening, over one of the best dinners I have ever had, watching the sun set on the frosty pinnacles of Mount Kenya.

"'Next to paradise, the most beautiful spot in the world,' said Martin."

Wherever the Johnsons were, Osa always fished. Whether visiting royalty in Europe or stop-

ping over in Australia, she would slip away whenever she had the opportunity.

In 1937, a tragic airline crash in California killed Martin and left Osa badly injured. She recovered, however, and continued touring the country as an advocate for wildlife, wrote a number of books about her and her husband's adventures, wrote children's wildlife books, and developed a line of educational stuffed animals endorsed by the National Wildlife Federation (NWF).

But she never stopped fishing. She regarded New England as one of her favorite places to fish, and in 1939 won the "Largest Fish" honor at the World Series of Freshwater Angling in the Eastern United States, where she was given a silver trophy cup and a "beautiful Thomas rod." In 1950, NWF named Osa America's "First Lady of Exploration" and honorary co-chair (along with Bing Crosby) of its annual National Wildlife Week. Her final trip to Africa was as technical director for

Daryl F. Zanuck's movie *Stanley and Livingston*, starring Spencer Tracy.

Perhaps Osa was dreaming of lazy trout floating clear streams of Mt. Kenya, or perhaps more exotic fish leaping from the surface of placid Lake Paradise. Wherever she may be, Osa's work lives on. It helped spark the world's imagination and woke many to the wonder and importance of the natural world. May her creel always be full. ♡



Osa died of a heart attack at the age of 58, 16 years after Martin's untimely death. Shortly after Martin's death, she had written longingly of the natural world she had enjoyed:

"The jungle is cooperative. It gives that it may live. That is the secret of nature and love. . . . Yes, I am going home — to the little compound in East Africa . . . I shall go there because I love the world as God made it, a world that every man loves, I think, in the secret places of his heart."

Acknowledgment:

Thanks to Conrad G. Froehlich and the Martin & Osa Johnson Safari Museum in Chanute for generous provision of time, literature, and photographs that made this fascinating project possible. (For information on the museum, go to www.safarimuseum.com.) For more detailed accounts of the Johnsons' exploits, read Osa Johnson's *I Married Adventure* and *Four Years In Paradise*, as well as Pascal James and Eleanor M. Imperato's *They Married Adventure*.

Among Johnson fans are zoologist and television personality Jack Hanna and arguably the world's best-known field biologist George Schaller. The Johnsons' films continue to be used in modern wildlife documentaries and television programs such as *National Geographic* and the *Discovery Channel*.

Osa poses with silver trophy she won in 1939 for the "Largest Fish" at the World Series of Freshwater Angling in the Eastern U.S.