

## INDIAN WILD ELEPHANT ROUNDUP MAKES AMERICAN RODEO SEEM TAME

By Joe McGowan Jr.

A roundup of 400 wild elephants, complete with scores of gun-toting forestry officers and 1,500 assistants is what the government of Mysore state in far southwestern India is what I had the pleasure of reporting in January, 1968.

Officially called a "khedda" the roundup took place over several days as the wild elephants were slowly and steadily pushed from their forest environment into huge, study pens on the banks of the Kabbani River.

Traditionally the kheddass have been held when wild elephants have reached such large numbers that they begin roaming through nearby villages, seeking food and destroying crops.

To carry out the roundup, the government hires 1,500 men called shikaris (hunters) and kadkurubars (beaters). These men enter the forest virtually shoulder-to-shoulder and push the wild tuskers toward the compound.

The beaters each carry a length of split bamboo which they shake to make an ear-splitting sound. The elephants retreat from the beaters. At night, the hunters and beaters build wood fires that they keep burning all night. The elephants will not cross through the fires.

State governments in Mysore and elsewhere made big money for years trapping, taming and selling elephants for use as beasts of burden. But the spreading use of tractors and other farm equipment

diminished the demand for elephants and consideration was given to abandoning the kheddass.

However, the Mysore government in 1967, an International Tourist Year, realized they could sell tickets to the spectacle and make even more money than by selling elephants. Spectators were charged an admission fee for the final day of the roundup, plus an extra charge for every movie or still camera.

On the final day of the roundup, spectators gathered outside the sturdy pen under palm leaf structures housing canteens, a bar, museum and souvenir shop.

At the appointed hour, a tame elephant placed a flower garland around the neck of Vice President V.V. Giri and guests took their seats. A radio transmission informed workers in the forest to begin "the final drive".

The 1,500 beaters and hunters began shaking the bamboo clappers and forestry officers mounted on tame elephants fired volleys from their shotguns, driving the wild herd into the river in front of the crowd. The elephants were then driven up a bank into a huge pen of mighty teak timbers. Steel cables had been strung across the river to prevent the wild elephants from escaping upstream.

After the wild elephants were inside the stockade, smudge fires were set around the perimeter to discourage the elephants from attempting to batter their way out.

Forestry officers, with water pumped from the river showered the elephants to cool them off and calm them down.

Then mahouts (elephant drivers) aboard four tame elephants went into the

pen and separated a wild elephant from the crowd. The tame elephants then would surround the wild tusker and brave workers would tie sturdy ropes around each leg of the wild beast. Each wild elephant then was led back into the forest with tame elephants surrounding the pushing the wild elephant.

In the forest, workers would tie each of the four ropes to sturdy trees so the wild elephant could not move. In the days that followed, the man who had successfully bid to buy an elephant would come to his new acquisition and feed the animal and include sugarcane sweets. Then the elephant would be allowed to go hungry for two or more days.

This process was repeated until the elephant gets used to the human handler and realizes its food comes from the man. Forestry officials told me the elephants are so smart that the taming process goes quickly. All the wild elephants go through this training process except for some old ones which forestry officials said could not be tamed. They are released back into the forest.

The Indian officials not only make money from the visiting tourists, but from sale of the elephants. A healthy elephant could bring as much as \$1,000.

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