

In 1936, the Hindenburg was the fastest way for pronghorn fawns to travel from Wyoming to Germany, and so began one historic journey of two iconic Western animals

SPECIAL DELIVERY

By Christina Schmidt Shorma

Photos courtesy of Buffalo Bill Center of the West

Serving as co-pilot for at least a moment, this pronghorn fawn starts its historic journey to New Jersey with pilot Bill Monday.

BILL MONDAY

I

n the early morning hours of Aug. 22, 1936, the German airship Hindenburg slowly descended into the Rhein-Main Airport in Frankfurt, Germany, after completing its seventh round-trip

flight to North America. As its 53 well-heeled passengers disembarked, crew members began offloading more than 250 pounds of mail and 300 pounds of cargo the ship had transported across the Atlantic in just less than 44 hours.

Among the letters and luggage unloaded from the belly of this well-known German zeppelin were two iconic animals from the American West, on a one-way journey from the Wyoming plains west of Meeteetse.

Pronghorn have inhabited the American West for at least one million years, with Eurasian ancestors being found in the fossil record beginning about 18 million years ago. Wyoming has long hosted half or more of the world's population of these unique animals.

Though pronghorn now number more than 400,000 in Wyoming, unregulated harvest and habitat loss in the late 1800s reduced a seemingly limitless population to just a few thousand by the turn of the century.

“Unless better protection is afforded, our antelope are doomed to destruction,” wrote Wyoming State Game Warden D. C. Nowlin in his annual report to the governor in 1902. “Too many of our citizens consider it a trivial offense to kill an antelope whenever the occasion offers, regardless of laws or season. The cultivation of local sentiment favorable to game protection and the increasing vigilance

Two pronghorn fawns from Meeteetse wait as the Hindenburg lands at Lakehurst, New Jersey, on Aug. 19, 1936. After a seven-hour refueling, the animals were loaded on the famous airship bound for Germany.

“

The antelope belong to the state, but I got a permit to catch the fawns and sell them to zoos. The state allows me the money as compensation for the feed the animals eat on the place. Nobody has any desire to kill the antelope, since this would exterminate them. That's what happened to the buffalo. But by selling the fawns we can reduce the number.

”



of our officers are the only means which will prevent the utter extermination of these beautiful animals.”

To halt the decline, the hunting season was closed in 1908 and not reopened until 1927. This protection, combined with the animal’s tendency to often produce twin or triplet offspring, allowed the population to rebound.

A 1919 report estimated only 8,387 animals statewide, climbing to 13,895 in 1923. But by the time the Hindenburg was making regular transatlantic flights in 1936, the population was estimated at 34,450.

Pronghorn on the Pitchfork

In northwest Wyoming, the efforts of successive generations of owners at one ranch allowed the local herd to grow from an estimated low of 20 animals to 2,000 or more.

The Pitchfork Ranch west of Meeteetse spanned 250,000 acres in the 1930s. Owned and operated by members of the Phelps family, the ranch raised cattle and sheep. In the 1980s, black-footed ferrets once thought to be extinct were rediscovered in this area. In 2016, the ranch served as one of the release sites for reintroduced black-footed ferrets. But back around the turn of the 20th century was when the ranch first flirted with fame.

In 1912, California native Charles Belden married Frances Phelps. She was the sister of Belden’s close friend Eugene Phelps, whom Belden had met while attending the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Ten years later, after the death of Frances and Eugene’s father Louis, Eugene and Charles began joint management of the ranch.

“

Wrapped in burlap sacks with just their heads exposed to limit their movement, the fawns were loaded on the plane and flown at 10,000 feet or higher for a smooth ride.

”

Antelope fawns on the Pitchfork Ranch were rounded up using nets and then placed in burlap sacks. They were fed cow’s milk and then transported to zoos around the country.

Over the next several years, Belden would make the Pitchfork Ranch world famous, not with his cattle, but with his camera. His tremendous photographic talent allowed him to capture scenes of spectacular landscapes, local wildlife and ranch life and share them with the world. His photos appeared in newspapers across the country as well as in *National Geographic*, the *Saturday Evening Post* and on the cover of *Life*.

“He really did put the ranch on the map, and the Western way of life,” said his granddaughter Lili Turnell. “I think he was quite a romantic. And he was very tough. Of all his travels, at least 60,000 miles were on horseback.”

In the early 1930s, Belden began a new venture on the ranch — capturing and raising pronghorn fawns and selling them to zoos and collectors across the country.

That the Pitchfork had any pronghorn can be partly credited to Belden’s father-in-law.

“One Meeteetse resident, who had a small grocery store, used to deplete the antelope herd, of which I understand there were not more than 20 at that time, by laying in a generous supply of winter meat,” wrote Frances, in “Brand of a Legend,” a history book about the Pitchfork Ranch. “Dad felt that they would soon be exterminated and forbade the shooting of antelope on his holdings. This did not daunt the man in question. He hunted just the same, so Dad bought the Meeteetse Mercantile from its original founders, enlarged and improved it and soon the transgressor found himself out of business.”

By the time Charles and Eugene took over management of the ranch in 1922, the pronghorn population was one of the largest in the state. Eventually Belden came to believe the animals were competing with his livestock for forage.

“I got into the antelope business just because they were there on the ranch,” said Belden in an interview with the *Detroit Free Press* in August 1936. “After all, I was trying to raise sheep and cattle, and the antelope were eating all the feed. The antelope belong to the state, but I got a permit to catch the fawns and sell them to zoos. The state allows me the money as compensation for the feed the animals eat on the place. Nobody has any desire to kill the antelope, since this would exterminate them. That’s what happened



to the buffalo. But by selling the fawns we can reduce the number.”

Belden described his method for capturing newborn fawns for the *New York World-Telegram* in January 1936.

“The only way to lay hands on the young ones is to come up from behind them in the sagebrush and use a kind of glorified butterfly net,” he said. “The best way is to let a fox terrier do the actual catching. We train the dogs to go after the fawns and down them without hurting them. We come on from behind and pick them up. First thing, give them a nice dinner, cow’s milk through a nipple. Then tie different colored ribbons around their necks to show which ones have been fed and when.”

Belden’s methods were successful enough that he was able to capture at least 200 fawns and transport them to zoos in cities such as Detroit, Chicago, St. Louis, Milwaukee, Philadelphia and Los Angeles. His cross-country deliveries soon earned him the nickname “Antelope Charlie.”

“He gained a lot of notoriety from it,” said Turnell. “I think he must have been a great self-promoter. He was always sending articles and photographs off here and there.”

Pronghorn aren’t antelope

The pronghorn’s range extends across the Western U.S. and into southwestern Canada and northern Mexico. Although often referred to as antelope, they are not a true antelope like those found in Africa and Asia.

One distinct difference between the two is antelope horns are keratin over a bony core that do not shed. These animals are part of the *bovidae* taxonomic family. Pronghorn, on the other hand, grow hollow keratin horn sheaths over a bony core that slough off and regrow.

The pronghorn’s unusual biology makes them the only surviving member of their North American taxonomic family, *Antilocapridae*. Fossil records from the Pliocene and Pleistocene eras of other members of this family show the animals to be adorned with an array of multiple, bizarre horns.

Charles Belden hand-raised the pronghorn on the Pitchfork Ranch until they were 2 months old. Then he would sell them to reserves, private collectors or zoos, the most famous of which took the pronghorn on a journey across the Atlantic.

The fawns were hand-raised until they reached 2 months old, at which time Belden would sell them to zoos, reserves or private collectors for \$100 each. To expedite their delivery and minimize stress, Belden and his friend and pilot Bill Monday, flew the fawns in Monday’s Ryan Monoplane.

Wrapped in burlap sacks with just their heads exposed to limit their movement, the fawns were loaded on the plane and flown at 10,000 feet or higher for a smooth ride and to maintain cooler temperatures during the trip.

Long-distance request

Though Belden’s regular flights to zoos across the country had allowed him to develop a protocol for safe handling and expedient delivery, a request from the Hanover Zoo in Germany for two fawns in the fall of 1936 presented challenging logistics.

Rather than send the fawns on a multiple-day voyage by ship, he sought a faster method. The German airship called the Hindenburg was the fastest available transportation to Europe at the time. It was the lead ship in a fleet of hydrogen-fueled airships built by the Luftschiffbau Zeppelin Company of Germany, and it could cross the Atlantic from the Naval Air



Pilot Bill Monday's trips taking pronghorn to the skies ended not long after the 1936 Hindenburg meet-up. Charles Belden ended his pronghorn venture and in 1940 left the Pitchfork Ranch.



Station at Lakehurst, New Jersey, to Germany in 60 hours or less.

The little pronghorn were soon consigned as special cargo on the massive zeppelin. At dawn on Aug. 18, 1936, Belden and Monday departed the Pitchfork, headed for the East Coast with 23 fawns aboard Monday's plane.

"None of the fawns was air-sick," Belden told *Time Magazine* in an Aug. 31, 1936, article. "Whenever they seemed to mind the heat, we just flew a thousand feet higher. The trip was a cinch."

But not all 23 fawns had through-tickets to Germany. En route, two fawns were delivered to the Lincoln Park Zoo in Chicago, two to the Philadelphia Zoo, three to Washington D.C., six to the Bronx Zoo and eight to a private collector in New Jersey.

The two destined for Germany spent the night at the Newark, New Jersey, airport romping in the National Guard hangar before their journey the next day. The Hindenburg arrived at Lakehurst at 8:20 p.m. Aug. 19 and, after seven hours of refueling, re-provisioning and loading passengers and cargo, the airship departed at 2:33 a.m. Aug. 20.

Though the crew of the Hindenburg kept meticulous records of every flight, the flight log for the trip to Germany that day has been lost. However, the crossing was likely uneventful and the fawns arrived safely at the zoo.

According to the zoo's records, the fawns were two of 11 Gabelbocke, or "forked bucks," the zoo acquired in 1936.

"Even in American zoos they were rarely seen, especially since they are difficult caregivers," noted a 1990 Hanover Zoo book celebrating its 125th anniversary. "However, the Gabelbocke imported in 1936 gave only a short guest role in the Zoo Hanover before they were sold to other Tiergarten (zoos), Berlin and Frankfurt."

Tumbling empires

Belden's pronghorn venture ended a few years after the Hindenburg flight, as did his marriage to Frances. By the early 1940s, Belden had left the Pitchfork Ranch.

"Eugene and Charles tried to run the ranch together, but it was a constant battle between them," Frances wrote in "Brand of a Legend." "Eugene was an engineer who loved to invent things and had no real regard for money and Charles was more interested in



A flight attendant gives the pronghorn one last bit of nourishment before take off.

photography than actual ranch management."

The Hindenburg also met a famously tragic end not long after the pronghorn flight. The largest object ever to take to the skies, an explosion during a landing at the Lakehurst station on May 6, 1937, brought the Hindenburg down for good after only a little more than a year in service. Thirty-six people were killed and the incident helped put an end to the era of the rigid airships in favor of more modern aircraft.

Belden remarried and relocated to St. Petersburg, Florida, where his nickname switched from Antelope Charlie to Seahorse Charlie. His photography career continued, as did his love for pronghorn. A small pronghorn insignia appeared on many of his photos and embellished some of his belongings, including a plane.

In February 1966, at age 78, Belden committed suicide. His collection of photos is now housed at the American Heritage Center at the University of Wyoming in Laramie. And many of his photos, office furnishings and other personal memorabilia are on display in Meeteetse at the Charles Belden Western Photography Museum, run by the Meeteetse Museums.

"I think he always related to the antelope, I suppose through his work to try and restore them," said Turnell. "I think that was his first love."

—Christina Schmidt Shorma is a freelance writer who resides in Dayton with her husband, two dogs, two cats and two horses.

“
His photography career continued, as did his love for pronghorn. A small pronghorn insignia appeared on many of his photos and embellished some of his belongings, including a plane.
”