

And God Laughs...

The Arthur Jones Autobiography

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“Success comes from good judgment, good judgment comes from experience, and experience comes from bad judgment.”

Anon.

In 1903, in Brownsville, Texas, a man named W. A. King started a business that he called ‘Snake King,’ and more than fifty years later this business was still being operated by his children. In those days, and for a long time afterwards, southern Texas and northern Mexico had millions of snakes, primarily rattlesnakes. While most people now, or even then, never suspected that something like the ‘snake business’ even existed, it was in fact a rather large business in this country for more than half a century.

In 1947, in a period of about six months, I made a net, clear profit of more than \$250,000.00 in the snake business; which, at that time, was a lot of money.

Throughout the Second World War, and for several years afterwards, there were more than seven-hundred carnivals on the road in this country, and almost all of them had a snake show. Additionally, there were several hundred privately-owned animal and reptile exhibits, so-called ‘roadside zoos.’ All of these carnivals and exhibits were customers for snakes, and they required a lot of snakes. Most snakes, particularly rattlesnakes, are very nervous in captivity; if they are being handled, as they usually were in both carnivals and exhibits, they had a ‘shelf life’ of less than two weeks. The result being that most carnivals established a standing order for fresh snakes to be shipped to them every week, throughout an annual season of about thirty-six weeks on the road; and while the cost of each weekly shipment was not very high, usually about fifty dollars, the annual total added up to about \$1,500,000.00, and that was just rattlesnakes for carnivals. When other types of snakes and exhibits were considered, the total annual sales reached a level of several million dollars. Perhaps not much when compared to something like the automobile industry even then, but a potential source of relatively large profits nevertheless. After the war, snakes were purchased from local hunters in Texas and Mexico for an average price of about nine cents a pound, by the ton; but sold retail for \$2.00 a pound.

Before the war, prices were much lower, snakes at retail went for an average of less than thirty-five cents a pound; but by the end of the war prices had increased greatly. Later, rattlesnakes sold for \$6.00 a pound, or more.

A good snake hunter could catch an average of at least fifty pounds of snakes a day; or, rather, a night, since most snake hunting was done at night; so a hunter could earn about \$4.50 a day, and sometimes quite a lot more, which was not a bad wage in that time and place, particularly when you consider the fact that almost all of these hunters were ‘wet backs,’ illegal immigrants from Mexico; people who found it very difficult to find any kind of work in this country since the immigration laws were much more strictly enforced during that period, people who could earn only about a dollar a day in Mexico for a twelve-hour work day, if they could find work at all.

One of my hunters in 1947 caught a total of 11,800 pounds of rattlesnakes and several thousand pounds of harmless snakes, in a period of less than five months.

We advertised for snake hunters by printing signs, in both English and Spanish, and tacked these signs to telephone poles and trees all over southern Texas and northern Mexico. We had to pay import duty on snakes that we brought in from Mexico, but that amounted to only seven and one-half percent of what we paid for the snakes so added less than a penny a pound to our costs. Apart from the requirement to pay a low rate of import duties, there were no restrictions regarding the importation of reptiles; the only type of wildlife that we could not legally import was parrots; which, of course, created both a high price for parrots in this country and a rather large parrot-smuggling industry. I refused to import anything that was prohibited or restricted in any manner, so never became involved in parrot smuggling; but, in those days, anybody involved in importing animals or reptiles was assumed by the authorities to be a parrot smuggler, and most of the people in that business were parrot smugglers. Snake King was arrested for smuggling parrots, had to leave the country in order to avoid going to jail, then lived out most of the rest of his life in Mexico and South America

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while his children ran the business in Brownsville; later, when he was a very sick old man, the Customs people allowed him to return to Brownsville to die and did not prosecute him.

In retrospect, I realize that there was undoubtedly a lot of illegal drug smuggling going on at that time, primarily marijuana, but I was not aware of it and never knowingly came in contact with it. Years later, a rather long list of people that I knew in the animal and snake business ended up in jail for smuggling drugs; but if they were doing so when I knew them I was not aware of it. My attitude about drug smugglers (kill 'em) was well known by most people who came into contact with me, so any such activity was never mentioned to me.

Snake King and I were not the only people involved in this business, there were several other snake dealers in Texas and a rather well-known man named Ross Allen started selling snakes from Florida sometime during the 1920s. A few of these dealers were honest, but most were not and several were outright crooks who cheated both their hunters and their customers; Snake King himself made a practice of cheating his hunters for years, promised them high prices for their snakes in advance of the hunting season and then greatly reduced the price when it came time to pay. He was able to pull this scam for a long time because most of his hunters had no other market for their snakes; but such actions on his part created an opportunity for me, because I always treated the hunters fairly, and the word spread, and by the end of my first full season in the business Snake King had to buy his snakes from me at a wholesale price of \$1.00 a pound, more than ten times what he had been paying only a few months earlier. At a retail selling price of \$2.00 a pound he could still make a profit, but nothing even close to his earlier profits. So it is not surprising that members of the King family were not my greatest admirers. A bit later, when one of the King brothers was killed in Mexico, other members of the family spread the rumor that I had killed him; when, in fact, he was the only member of the family that I both liked and trusted.

One of the biggest crooks in the snake business was a man in Laredo, Texas, named Oscar Cavazos; he operated under seven different company names; would cheat a customer under one company name and then send him literature advertising another company so he could cheat the same customer again. But, eventually, it caught up with him; he had cheated so many people under different company names, all based in Laredo, that it finally became impossible to sell snakes from Laredo. Which situation created a problem for me, because my business was based in Laredo. I was forced to solve this problem by establishing an address in Cotulla, Texas, more than sixty miles north of Laredo. Most of our business was conducted by Western Union telegrams, and since all incoming telegrams were sent to Cotulla I had to pay an additional charge to have them sent on to me in Laredo. Incoming orders by telegraph were prepaid by the senders, but they still cost me about a dollar apiece to get them sent on to Laredo.

Incoming mail was sent to a post office box in Cotulla, so I had to drive back and forth at least twice a week to get the mail; most of which mail consisted of checks from the Railway Express Agency (REA) since most shipments were made C. O. D. (cash on delivery); REA collected from the customer upon delivery and then sent me a check.

Customers were also required to pay all of the shipping costs, and these were rather high since the REA charged one-hundred and fifty percent of a normal first class rate for shipments of snakes; their excuse for such a high rate being the fact, they said, that quite a few snakes died enroute and they were then required to pay for any shipments that arrived dead. Sure. Well, in fact, I quickly learned that it was all but impossible to get them to pay for a shipment that arrived dead; after several unsuccessful attempts to get them to pay in situations where they were obviously at fault, I quit trying and suffered the losses myself.

Snakes cannot stand high temperatures and if a box of snakes is left out in the sun on a hot day, even for a few minutes, the snakes will all be killed. And while our shipping boxes were always clearly labeled 'KEEP IN THE SHADE,' these instructions were sometimes ignored. And when that happened it created a real mess: a dead snake in hot weather will turn into a soup of bones and maggots within a period of about twenty-four hours, and the smell has to be experienced to be appreciated; after a day or two a dead snake smells worse than a morgue after a week-long power failure. Dead people, after a few days in hot weather, smell very bad, but dead snakes smell even worse.

If even one snake, in a shipment of a dozen or more snakes, died enroute, then the entire shipment was usually dead on arrival; and because of the fact that dead snakes rot so quickly, it sometimes appeared to a customer that the snakes were already dead when they were shipped. The only way to avoid such an accusation being to guarantee live

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arrival, and I did. But that guarantee created problems with some customers: a man who operated a snake exhibit in Virginia, a man who called himself Doctor Childress, took advantage of this situation in order to cheat dealers all over the country. Fortunately, by the time he got around to me I was well aware of his activities; so when he tried to cheat me, it backfired on him.

He would arrange for a rather large order of snakes, a total of several hundred dollars, by telegram (thereby avoiding the possibility of being accused of using the mails to defraud), a shipment to be made collect for shipping costs and C. O. D. for the value of the order; but, then, when the shipment arrived, the dealer would get a telegram from the local REA agent claiming that the shipment arrived in very bad shape, with evil-smelling liquid coming out of the boxes; and that Doctor Childress had refused to accept a shipment in such a condition, which, the REA agent said, was understandable under the circumstances. Thus having established the problem, the REA agent's telegram would offer a possible solution; Doctor Childress would, the agent said, agree to pay the shipping costs if the C. O. D. payment requirement was lifted. Then the boxes would be opened in the presence of the agent and Childress would pay for any snakes that were still alive.

If, instead, the shipment was returned to the dealer, then the dealer would be required to pay shipping costs in both directions; and by the time the shipment was returned to the dealer you could be sure that all of the snakes would be dead. So the agent's offer appeared to be the only reasonable option.

Then, of course, it always turned out that all of the snakes were dead on arrival and the dealer was paid nothing. Childress and the REA agent had a deal going and worked this scam on dealers all over the country.

So, when I got a large order from Childress I knew what to do: I packed several boxes full of used bricks and broken concrete blocks, labeled them live snakes and shipped them to Childress collect for freight costs and C. O. D. for the stated value of several hundred dollars; then sat back to wait for the agent's telegram. And, sure enough, about three days later the expected telegram arrived, informing me that it appeared that at least part of the snakes were dead and making an offer in line with the one mentioned above.

Well, in fact, the law at the time clearly stated that the party getting the shipment did not have the right to even see the shipment until after it had been paid for in full, both freight costs and the stated value; so the agent was in clear violation of Federal law even if what he said was true. So I sent him an immediate reply telling him exactly what I had done, and also stating that if I did not get immediate payment in full, by telegraphic money order within a period of no more than twenty-four hours, I would see to it that both the agent and Childress went to jail; I said, among other things . . . "I have always wanted to own an REA agent, and now I do."

About six hours later a telegraphic money order arrived with payment in full; of course, after that I lost all of Childress' business, but I managed to survive without it. Afterwards, I heard rumors to the effect that Childress did not like me very much.

That situation, however, was an exception, not the rule; carnival people in general are not noted for their honesty, will try to cheat you any way they can, and quite a few did manage to cheat me. After a bit of experience you learned to be very cautious when dealing with carnival people, and if any slightest doubt existed I would always demand full payment in advance of shipment. But since a lot of dealers had established reputations for cheating their customers, some potential customers would not pay in advance, so that tended to reduce my sales volume somewhat as well.

But, over a period of a few years, you learned just which customers could be trusted, and they learned to trust you; so, finally, our business was primarily limited to a few hundred known customers.

Carnival snake show operators tended to go into and out of business rather quickly, but most of the long-established, permanently located exhibits remained steady customers for a period of many years; and these exhibits usually bought far more snakes every year than a typical carnival snake show operator did. Several of my customers bought at least \$20,000.00 worth of snakes from me every year for a period of nearly twenty years, and a few bought a lot more than that.

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In 1950, I discovered a source of snakes in Colima, Mexico, that was literally a goldmine; not only rattlesnakes but a wide variety of very valuable harmless snakes, which were in great demand by people who were afraid to handle poisonous snakes, and which sold for much higher prices, three or four dollars a pound, or more. And, in Colima, snakes were available by the ton, at very low prices. On one trip to Colima I brought out 1,700 boa constrictors (not pounds, snakes), as well as several tons of other snakes, both harmless and poisonous.

But, in 1950, Colima was not the easiest place in the world to reach, was in fact damned near impossible to get to; there was no airport, no railroad, and no highway, the only way to get there involved driving a truck over a very rough logging road that went over the top of a 12,000 foot active volcano, a road that was so steep in places that your average speed was usually less than one mile an hour for a distance of about forty miles, driving on a very rough, very narrow trail with a drop-off of several thousand feet on one side. I later married a young woman from another part of Mexico and when she first went over that trail into Colima she was utterly terrified throughout that part of the trip.

In one part of the trail the grade was so steep that the only way you could move up it was to have one man on the ground behind the truck; when the truck stalled as a result of the steep grade, the man on the ground had to quickly wedge a large rock behind the rear wheels to prevent the truck from rolling backwards; then the driver would hold the brakes, rev up the engine to its highest possible speed and then pop the clutch in the lowest gear, whereupon the truck would lurch upwards for a few feet and then stall again. So the man on the ground had to continually move the rock behind the rear wheels while trying to move upwards on a grade that was so steep that it was very difficult to even remain upright. I made quite a number of such trips into and out of Colima, but could never get anybody who would agree to a second trip that required him to be the man on the ground; one such trip was more than enough, thank you.

On my first trip to Colima I started out with a total of ten new tires for the truck, six on the ground and four spares; but by the time I got back to anything close to a reasonable highway, I had a total of only four tires on the ground and no spares; and the four tires on the ground had all been repaired. Filling stations were few and far between so we had to haul our own gas in fifty-five gallon drums, and since the available water in most of Mexico in those days would probably kill you and would, at least, make you very sick, we had to haul all of our drinking water, and most of our food since the local food was also dangerous.

A man that I met in Colima on my first trip, Jose Jesus Garcia Sanchez, later became my agent for buying snakes in Colima; during the time that I knew him, his wife gave birth to a total of twenty-four full-term, live-born children, only six of whom survived early infancy, eighteen of whom died very young. Yet Jesus could never quite understand my continued refusal to drink the water or eat the food in his house; after all, it never hurt him. Sure.

Jesus was a very dark-skinned American Indian who might have been mistaken, because of his color, for a Negro; but was, in fact, a pure blooded Indian. There were no Negroes in that part of Mexico at the time, and never had been, and very few Negroes anywhere in Mexico.

Jesus never learned to speak a word of English, but I rather quickly learned to speak Spanish; later, three of my children were raised speaking Spanish in my home as their first language, started speaking English only a few months before they started going to school.

Jesus operated his snake-buying business out of his house and the house was usually almost filled to the ceiling with boxes full of snakes. Nobody objected since practically everybody in town operated some kind of a business out of their house.

The snakes were weighed as they came in on a scale situated on the sidewalk in front of his house, were usually weighed and purchased by his wife and sometimes by one of his children, and all of this activity was carried on in plain sight of his neighbors. When it came time to make a shipment of snakes by truck, hundreds of boxes had to be manufactured and all of these boxes were made inside the house or in the street in front of the house. Local laborers were available in almost unlimited numbers at an average wage of about a dollar for a twelve-hour work day; but prices for staples were so low that a man could easily support a family on such a wage. Most of the city of Colima in those days looked like it was built several hundred years earlier, and a lot of it was. In another part of Mexico, Merida, Yucatan, the Municipal Palace (the seat of the local government) was built less than fifteen years after Columbus discovered America, and is still in use. They built things to last in those days.

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The state of Yucatan, far to the east of Colima, was totally isolated from the rest of Mexico until 1960, could be reached only by water or by air; most of the people then living in Yucatan did their out-of-town shopping in New Orleans rather than in Mexico City, because it was easier to reach. I established a second animal-collecting compound in Yucatan in 1951 and a third compound in the southern part of the state of Veracruz in the same year. Colima supplied far greater numbers of snakes than the other two compounds but I got large numbers of monkeys, ocelots and jaguars from both Yucatan and Veracruz. According to the National Geographic magazine, there were far more jaguars in the southern part of the state of Veracruz than there were any place else in the world, and there certainly were a lot of them.

My compound in Veracruz was also in a place that was all but impossible to reach; again there was no airport, no railroad and nothing that could really be called a road. Most of the local women thought nothing about walking around topless and very few of the children wore clothes of any kind until they were about five or six years old. The 'hotel,' using the term very loosely, in the village of San Juan Evangelista, where my compound was located, consisted of a small four-room, very roughly constructed building with a thatch roof, dirt floors, open windows and doors, and with nothing in the way of furniture apart from a very simple bed. The result being that the rooms were almost alive with mosquitoes, flies, cockroaches, vampire bats, chickens, dogs, cattle, goats and children. There was, of course, no running water and nothing in the way of a bathroom; you had to go outside the village and shit in the woods. Everything considered, it was not the best place I ever stayed; but it was not the worst, either. By comparison, some of the places I stayed in Africa were a lot worse. At that time there was not much malaria in the area, but for a while they did have a serious outbreak of Yellow Fever, which is far worse; and since vampire bats usually carry rabies, and since such bats were there in great numbers, cases of rabies were fairly common. If you were foolish enough to drink the available water or eat the local food you would almost certainly come down with a wide variety of tropical diseases and parasites; many of the local people appeared to be immune to such things, or at least managed to survive in spite of them, but an outsider had to be very careful indeed.

In addition to some local snakes, a lot of jaguars, ocelots and monkeys, we also got a rather wide variety of other animals, anteaters, tapirs, agoutis, prehensile-tailed, tree climbing porcupines, coati mundis, pacas and several others; all of which were in rather great demand in this country.

Some time later, for a period of several years, I exported an average of 1,100 squirrel monkeys a week from a compound in Iquitos, Peru, plus a wide variety of other monkeys. Altogether, I imported about half a million squirrel monkeys from Peru; and there were several other people importing them on that scale from both Peru and southern Colombia. The Peruvian compound also supplied the largest boa constrictors in the world, by the ton, as well as much larger anacondas and a wide variety of other tropical snakes and animals. When we first started importing from Peru, many of the reptiles and animals that we imported were new to zoologists, had never previously been known. Among other new animals that we discovered was a third, previously unsuspected race of giant tortoises.

In a very remote part of Mexico, I discovered a population of large crocodiles that were previously unknown to science; and remain unknown to science to this day, because I never reported them. Did not report them because they appear to occur only in a rather small area, and I suspected that if I did report them they would then quickly be wiped out by a bunch of supposed 'experts' trying to 'study' them. I don't know the maximum size of these unreported crocs, the largest one I measured was just over thirteen feet long; but the most distinct features that set them apart from all other crocs are their eyes and their teeth, both of which are unique to these crocodiles. The so-called American Crocodile has 72 teeth and normal-looking eyes, but these crocs have only 66 teeth, the same number as the big African crocs, and hyper-thyroid-looking eyes, the eyes bulge upwards out of the top of their head in a very distinctive manner.

In an attempt at CYA (cover your ass), I carefully filmed these unique characteristics and then included those scenes as part of a film shown on worldwide television; but I did not mention the fact that this was a new type of crocodile, since doing so would probably attract unwanted attention to the matter. But the film did, at least, provide me with proof that I was 'first' in case somebody else later claimed to be the discoverer of the animals. But, years later, I have never heard that such a discovery has been announced, so they appear to still be unsuspected by science.

When I first started operations in Mexico, quite a large part of the country still remained almost untouched; and even now, in 1994, there are parts of Mexico that have never been visited by outsiders, places where the people still live

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exactly like they did hundreds, or even thousands of years ago. Some of the Indian tribes in Mexico have never been contacted by outsiders; not, at least, by anybody that survived the experience.

More than thirty years ago, I made films in a totally isolated village of Indians still living in the Stone Age; these people call themselves Lacondones and are the only surviving members of a race of people called the Mayas, people who once constructed a vast civilization in Yucatan; giant buildings made out of stone and thousands of miles of paved highways were constructed by these people's ancestors at a time when most of the people in Europe were still living in caves. A civilization that had died before the first European explorers first came to this continent. There were, at the time I filmed these Indians, less than two hundred full-blooded Lacondones still surviving; all of them living in two small villages deep in the jungles of Mexico, living in exactly the same way they lived hundreds of years ago.

Very few of them could speak a word of Spanish and most of them probably did not realize that the country of Mexico even existed; or, at least, that was their situation thirty years ago; but, lately, I have heard rumors to the effect that civilization is starting to encroach on the area where they live; if so, they will probably be wiped out within a relatively brief time. Many such primitive races do not appear to be able to adapt to modern civilization, or perhaps choose not to live under changed circumstances.

And, directly contrary to currently widespread opinion, most such primitive races are anything but peaceful; are, instead, very violent; and the Lacondones are no exception. Several examples of such almost random violence occurred while we were filming these people. While I was there, one of the few members of the tribe who could speak Spanish told a German psychiatrist from the famous Menninger Institute in Kansas, a man who was there in order to study them . . . "I would like to kill you, but I probably won't, because, if I did, the man in the village with an airplane (meaning me) might call somebody on his radio; and if he did, then they might send the police, and if they did I would have to move, and that would mean that I would have to build another hut, and I don't want to build another hut. So I probably won't kill you."

This statement was made by the Indian to the visiting scientist while the Indian was guiding him through the jungles in order to show him a previously unknown ancient ruin. Hundreds, perhaps thousands, of such unknown ruins still remain in many parts of Mexico; I have discovered several such ruins myself, and my long-time agent in Merida, Yucatan, earned most of his income for many years by looting such unknown ruins.

When the Indian and the scientist returned to the village several hours later, the scientist immediately came to me and asked me to fly him out when I departed; he had planned to stay several weeks longer, but was then afraid to stay. Ironically, this scientist went there in an attempt to prove his thesis that primitive races of people, if undisturbed by outsiders, are very peaceful, totally non-violent. Sure.

So he left with us, and was damned glad to get away alive.

One member of that tribe, a man named Obregon, was forced to live apart from the other villagers because he had killed several people. And while we were there, the male head of one household went berserk and started beating all of the other members of his family with a stone ax, damned near killed several of them. In addition to the threat given while walking through the jungle with the Indian guide, the scientist witnessed this large-scale beating because he was staying in the same hut when it happened. So he was more than ready to go when I left.

At that time, reaching that village was very difficult, it could not be even closely approached by either road or water and walking would have required a hike of more than a hundred miles through untracked jungles and mountains; so the only way in was by air, but that required a very high performance airplane that was capable of landing on a very short and rough patch of land near the village. The remains of a crashed airplane was still there; obviously somebody else had tried to land and failed to make it. Fortunately, I had the right tool for the job, an airplane that could land almost anywhere. It wasn't very fast, but it didn't require an airport either.

I was involved in the animal and reptile business on a fairly small scale for about two years immediately prior to the Second World War, without much in the way of financial success to show for my efforts; but I was, at least, gaining experience that proved to be very valuable later. After the war, and before the trip to the Caprivi Strip in 1956, I established animal and reptile collecting compounds in Texas, New Mexico, Oklahoma, Louisiana and Mexico. Then,

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after the Caprivi trip, I established one compound in Baranquilla, Colombia, South America, another in Iquitos, Peru, one in Managua, Nicaragua, Central America, and one in Singapore. Then, later, for a period of several years, my activities were largely restricted to Africa.

In the meantime I had been married three times, divorced twice, and had fathered four children; my travels for a number of years were so extensive that I had very little time for much in the way of a home life.

Having avoided medical school because I did not want to work an average of twenty hours a day, seven days a week, like my father did, I nevertheless worked at a very similar pace throughout most of my life; now, many years later, I still don't sleep very much, but I no longer have the energy required to work at the pace I did for about forty years. I have been dead broke several times, have made fortunes and then lost them, made very large fortunes in several businesses, importing animals, reptiles and tropical fish, film production, the operation of international airlines for the transportation of airfreight, the exercise-machine business (Nautilus) and most recently in the medical market. So I have certainly been busy for a very long time; yet, now, in retrospect, when I look back over the years of my life, most of it appears to have been wasted effort. Many things that once appeared to me to be all important now hold no slightest interest for me. I still own the largest privately-owned airport in the world, but no longer have any airplanes; until a very few years ago I had the largest privately-owned collection of exotic wild animals in the world, but now have no animals of any kind, not even a cat, and I like cats.

Before the Second World War, I was in on the start of so-called 'Rattlesnake Roundups,' which started in Okeene, Oklahoma, later spread to Waynoka, Oklahoma, and now have spread to several other locations in Texas, Georgia and Florida. In the early days of these roundups I put on a show for thousands of visitors that appeared to be utterly insane, and perhaps was: a so-called 'pit' was constructed out of wood and canvas, with four-foot-high walls around an area of concrete floor inside a building, the dimensions being about sixteen feet by twenty-four feet. Then, at the start of the day on which the roundup was held, we would put four or five hundred freshly-captured rattlesnakes inside this pit; and as the day went by and more snakes were captured and brought into town, all of them would be added to the pit; so that, by the end of the day, there might be two thousand rattlesnakes in the pit; sometimes they were stacked up so deep that it required eight people to keep them from crawling over the top of the walls of the pit and thus becoming loose among the audience. Two men were stationed at each of the four corners of the pit, and it was their job to poke the snakes back down with sticks in order to stop them from escaping. Since the audience was usually packed solid about twenty-people deep on all sides of the pit, a rattlesnake loose on the floor outside of the pit would probably have produced a panic.

My Job? I removed my shoes and socks, rolled my pants legs up above my knees, and then spent about twelve straight hours wading around inside the pit with the snakes, handling them with my bare hands. It was, to say the least, a very spectacular show. But, in spite of appearances, it was actually relatively safe; because, if, for example, you had a total of 1,000 snakes in the pit, then about 900 of these would be covered up by the snakes on top of them and would not be in a position to bite you; then, of the 100 or so on top of the piles that might be in a position to bite you, at least half of these would remain asleep at any given moment and thus offered no threat, and you can determine that a snake is sleeping at a glance; then, most of the remaining fifty or so snakes that were not asleep would do everything possible to avoid you, try to crawl out of the pit over the stacks of snakes piled up in the corners of the pit, which usually left you with only ten or twelve snakes that actually represented a threat, snakes that would bite you if given the chance; but these few could also be identified at a glance and easily avoided since poisonous snakes will not attack you, will bite you only if you move inside their limited striking range.

And since a man can move his hands a great deal faster than a striking rattlesnake can move his head, it is rather easy and usually quite safe to grab a snake that is a threat. I put on such shows about a dozen times and was bitten only twice during such shows; but most rattlesnake bites are not fatal even without treatment and with proper treatment seldom cause anything worse than pain and swelling for a few days. Most of the thousands of people who witnessed these shows probably assumed that I was crazy, and maybe I was, but it paid damned well and produced no serious problems.

I have been bitten a total of twenty-four times by poisonous snakes, and have treated more than four hundred poisonous snake bites; so far without a single fatality and without permanent damages of any kind. Have been this

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successful primarily because I never used the so-called antivenin for treating such bites; antivenin for the treatment of snake bites has been on the market in this country for more than sixty years, and is still being used by many doctors, but in fact is frequently far more dangerous than the bite itself. I am aware of two people who have been killed by antivenin within the last two years; people who did not die from the bite but from the treatment.

The only treatment that I ever used was cutting and sucking, and it never failed. In 1926, a doctor in San Antonio, Texas, Dudley Jackson, who later became a friend of mine but who is now dead, conducted a very carefully planned research program on the subject of treating snake bites; the results of that research were published in a medical journal in 1927, but have generally been ignored ever since.

He standardized the venom of Western Diamondback Rattlesnakes, then carefully determined the MLD (minimum lethal dose) when such venom was injected into the buttocks of a dog. Then he injected obviously lethal doses into a large group of dogs, waited a certain period of time, then made one incision over the injection site and applied forced suction in an attempt to remove the venom. One hundred percent of that group of dogs survived with no other treatment. Then he took the fluids that were removed by suction, put the fluids into a centrifuge in order to separate the venom from the other fluids, scraped the venom off the top (it moved to the top because it was lighter than the other fluids) and then reinjected this venom into another group of dogs, none of which were treated in any way, and all of which died.

So there was the answer, well established nearly seventy years ago, but still being debated and seldom being used.

Well, as somebody once said . . . “You do it your way, and I will do it my way.”

During the first few years of my involvement with snakes, if antivenin had ever been available I would have used it; but it never was available to me when it was needed, so I never used it. But within a few years I had learned that in fact it was dangerous as Hell, so have avoided it ever since.

As somebody once said . . . “We learn, when we learn, only from experience; and then we learn only from our mistakes, our successes serve only to reinforce our superstitions.”

Well, if mistakes and failures tend to educate you, then I have certainly been educated, because a list of my mistakes would extend from here to the moon in very small print.

I have never been a criminal in any sense of the word, but I have done a very long list of things that are illegal; the irony being the fact that I was never accused of any of these things. Which is not intended to imply that I have never been accused of crimes; quite the contrary, I have been accused of everything just short of killing President Lincoln, and would probably have been accused of that if I had been alive at the time. The irony in this case being the fact that I never did any of the things that I was accused of.

How many rattlesnakes have I handled? Millions; I have had in my personal possession at one time, in one place, on three separate occasions, more than 20,000 rattlesnakes; and, for a period of many years, when we got down to a point where we had only 1,000 rattlesnakes in stock we thought we were out of rattlesnakes. The irony in this situation being the fact that I have always liked rattlesnakes, yet have probably been responsible for the deaths of more rattlesnakes than any other ten people in history.

A friend of mine from Oklahoma, Bob Jenni, a man who has devoted most of his life to snakes, called me a year or so ago and started complaining about the fact that people were cleaning out many of the rattlesnake dens in Oklahoma. So I said . . . “Listen, Bob, between you and me, we have probably been responsible for the deaths of more rattlesnakes than everybody else who ever lived; so why are you complaining?”

To which he replied . . . “Yes, I know, but that was us, and now its them.”

The question of just how big rattlesnakes get has been debated hotly for years, and is still being debated; most snake books will tell you that the largest rattlesnakes are the Eastern Diamondbacks from Florida; but, as usual, the books are wrong, Eastern Diamondbacks, at best, fall into the third category of size; both Western Diamondbacks and so-called Mexican Green, actually properly named Mexican West-coast rattlesnakes, are larger.

“...And God Laughs”

The Arthur Jones Collection

Having been interested in this question for years, and having been involved in quite a long list of fist-fights as a result of calling someone a liar when they told me an obviously untrue story about a giant rattlesnake, I decided to try to determine just how big rattlesnakes would become if they were raised under ideal conditions.

A freshly-captured, wild rattlesnake that is three feet long will usually weight about one pound, while a six-foot rattlesnake (and these are rare) will usually weight about eight pounds. Ross Allen purchased hundreds-of-thousands of Eastern Diamondback rattlesnakes over a period of about fifty years, and the largest one that he even claimed to have seen weighed twelve pounds; and he had no proof of any kind in regard to that snake's size, although he had thousands of things in the way of proof regarding much less spectacular snakes, skins, pictures, preserved snakes and a long list of other things.

So, about fifteen years ago, I took a group of Western Diamondback rattlesnake babies that were delivered from their mother at birth in a manner that would keep them sterile; this being required to assure that they would not be exposed to either disease or parasites from the mother snake. Then they were raised in a manner that we considered to be ideal; they were provided with perfectly stable levels of both temperature and humidity, the angle of the light entering their cages was never changed, and they were provided with as much food as they wanted, as often as they wanted it. At an age of four years, the largest of these snakes weighed twenty-four pounds, six and one-quarter ounces, with an empty stomach. But was still slightly less than seven feet long.

A year after we started with this group of Western Diamondbacks, we got a group of Mexican Green babies and started raising them under identical conditions; and, initially, they appeared to be growing faster than the Western Diamondbacks had. But, unfortunately, when the Mexican snakes were just three years old, a virus of some kind was inadvertently introduced into the collection; the result being that we ended up having to kill the entire collection, so we never did find out just how big they might have become, or which type would reach a greater size.

Herpetologists, people interested in snakes, who saw these snakes just before we had to kill them were invariably stunned, had never before seen anything even close to such size. Now, the only thing I have to show for this project is some very large snake skins, several of which are nearly ten feet long; but remember, snake skins stretch, so the skin is always much longer than the live snake.

Based upon my own experience with literally millions of snakes all over the world, I have never seen anything of a size that even closely approached the sizes that are routinely quoted in books.

I have now been out of the snake business for quite a while, but the business still continues; a surprising number of people in this country keep snakes for pets or simply because they like them, and the number of people who keep snakes runs into the thousands. In the meantime, the prices have gone through the roof; snakes that I sold for about a dollar may now sell for a hundred dollars or more. If I still had all of the snakes that I have had in my lifetime, and if I could sell them at current prices, I would be a multi-billionaire.

For a long time we took all of the baby snakes that were born in captivity out into the woods and released them, assuming that they were worthless; but now, such babies sell in great numbers at very high prices.

Again based upon my own observations, I believe that there are now less than one tenth of one percent of the number of snakes in Florida that there were sixty years ago; even fifty years ago you could catch them by the truckload in a single night, but now you seldom see a snake of any kind.