

# And God Laughs...

## The Arthur Jones Autobiography

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**“It is impossible to keep young African elephants alive in captivity.”**

**Dr. Pienaar.**

Before the elephant capturing operation could be started in Kruger, I had a great deal to do in the way of preparation, had to design and build a vehicle to be used for filming while going at a high rate of speed over very rough country, with no vibration in the film that was shot, had to locate and hire several people, move tons of equipment to the park, build a compound to hold the elephants after they were captured and a long list of other things.

I managed to locate Graham Hall, the young man who worked for me during the last part of the Caprivi trip and afterwards worked for me for a while in Louisiana, and he joined us in Kruger. I hired a German named Dieter Plage who had been unsuccessfully trying to produce wildlife films in southern Africa, and also hired his assistant, a young German woman named Inge Topperwein. Rodney Borland quit his job in the Natal parks and joined my crew, and the Chief Capture Officer of the Natal parks, Jan Oelofse, took an extended leave from his job and took charge of caring for the elephants after they were captured. Jan was also responsible for the development of the formula that we used for feeding young elephants.

Both Donald Spence and Eliza Steffee were still with me and we hired a couple of girls from Durban to help maintain our camp in Kruger.

Joyce, Bill Binnings and Herbert Prechtel were no longer with me; and having gotten rid of them I did not anticipate any more problems from members of my own crew; which was just as well, because I had more than enough in the way of problems from Pienaar and a few of his assistants.

Having been violently opposed to everything I suggested, Pienaar was put in charge of the operation, and while I was able to prevent some of his ideas from being applied in practice I could see right from the start that he would try to give me as much trouble as he could. If I had been forced to construct the elephant compound in accordance with his plans it would have cost me about a hundred thousand dollars, but I managed to kill that suggestion and actually built a much better compound for about two thousand dollars.

We intended to use a helicopter, rented together with a pilot from a firm in Johannesburg at my expense, and Pienaar insisted that it was not to be used for filming or anything else except darting elephants; which did not stop him from using it for his own purposes, filming lions from it with his own camera among other things.

The crates that he designed and had built for shipping the elephants in, also at my expense, were far too big and had to be rebuilt.

Being clearly able to read the handwriting on the wall, I gathered all of my crew members together, and told them . . . “You can count on it, we are going to have a lot of trouble with these people, and at times you will get so pissed off that you will feel like killing somebody; but I want it clearly understood by everybody here that you are not to respond, regardless of the provocation; if they start shooting at you, and they might, just smile and walk away.”

Following that meeting, Jan Oelofse took me aside and told me about another of Player’s secrets: in total secrecy Player had been buying as many captive raised cheetahs as he could find and Jan had been training them to hunt; they would capture impalas, take them to the hidden cheetah enclosure and then release them so that the cheetahs could run them down and kill them. Player intended to release these cheetahs into one of the Natal parks, but never having been trained by their mothers to hunt they could not have survived in the wild without this training. This remained a secret, Jan said, because Player was afraid that somebody might object, might believe that it was brutal.

Kruger National Park has a total area of about 8,000 square miles, is a relatively long, thin rectangle, two-hundred miles long and about forty miles wide. The eastern edge of the park forms the border between South Africa

## The Arthur Jones Collection

and Mozambique, Portuguese East Africa, and the Communist rebel forces were much better organized in Mozambique than they were in South Africa, so a military airport had been built near the southern end of the park. There were no military airplanes stationed on that field while we were there, and since civilian flying over any part of the park was normally prohibited, we were the only people using the field.

The field provided us with a convenient landing place that was fairly close to the elephant-holding compound, but had absolutely nothing in the way of usual airport facilities, no fuel, no hangers, not even a telephone, and no lights; and the field also had a couple of drawbacks; one, large animals seemed to be attracted to the runway so sometimes we had to buzz them in order to clear the runway prior to landing; two, lions are attracted to tires and will try to eat them if given the chance, so it was necessary to post a couple of guards to spend the night keeping the lions away from a parked airplane's tires.

Most of the visiting tourists stayed in small tents and there was constant danger from wild animals, the most dangerous of which were the hyenas; it is commonly believed that hyenas are scavengers, but in fact they are very dangerous predators, will sometimes run a pride of lions away from its kill and take it away from them. Two tourists were badly injured by hyenas while we were in the park, one lost a foot and the other lost a large part of her face, and the German girl working for me, Inge Töpferwien, almost fell victim to a hyena. In the middle of the night, while she was sleeping, a hyena tore a big hole in the side of her tent and was trying to get inside of the tent with her when she woke up and starting screaming for help. Dieter Plage, the German cameraman, heard her scream and ran out of his tent stark naked, wearing only a pair of boots, and started beating the hyena across the back with a club. Our elephant compound, and our tents, were located close to a large camp called Skakuza, where the headquarters of the park's officials were situated. Skakuza also had a fairly large and very nice restaurant, but not much else in the way of tourist facilities; there were, in addition to the tents, a few so-called rondavels, small, circular, native-style huts, but most of these were booked far in advance by tourists and none were available to us when we first arrived to start work.

Most of our supplies had to be purchased in a small town located just outside the southern border of the park, about forty miles away from our camp, and we had to fly a distance of more than a hundred miles in order to buy fuel for our airplanes. Apart from the military airport near Skakuza, there were no other landing strips inside the park, but it was still possible to land in several other places because the land throughout the park was relatively flat and open areas were quite common. The helicopter that we used during the operations could land almost anywhere.

Hiring that helicopter and its pilot was one of the most expensive parts of the operation, I had to pay more than a hundred dollars an hour for each hour that it was flown, including the flying time back and forth between the park and Johannesburg, where the helicopter was based, a distance of several hundred miles that required several hours for each trip because the helicopter was very slow. And, because of carelessness on the part of the helicopter pilot, it was left unguarded one night and lions destroyed all of the seats, and I had to pay for that damage. I also had to pay for the construction of more than twenty-five miles of roads inside the park; roads that were required to reach remote parts of the park; Pienaar insisted that the operation be carried out in places where the tourists could not go, so we had to work well away from any tourist roads.

Pienaar did everything he could think of to make the operation both very difficult and as expensive as possible for me; he did not want us to be successful; primarily, I suppose, because he had clearly stated in advance that what we were trying to do was impossible. Then, of course, after the fact, he gave himself full credit for the operation, told the newspapers that it had been his idea and was successful only because of his efforts.

Pienaar was obviously insane; on one occasion I saw him beat his head against a tree, repeatedly and hard, until his face was covered with blood, while crying like a baby; this occurred shortly after he realized that we might be successful in spite of his efforts to make us fail. Then, a few years later, he was promoted to the position of Director of Kruger park. Since then has told a number of people that he and I are close personal friends. But, as they say . . . "With friends like him, who needs enemies?"

For my own purposes, I wanted to export a total of 110 elephants to this country, a hundred small babies and ten carefully-selected adults, all of these being big bulls with large tusks, and Pienaar should have been more than happy to rid the park of these big bulls, because they were the ones that were doing most of the damage to the park; they liked to

## The Arthur Jones Collection

eat large quantities of fermenting fruit, which made them drunk, and while drunk they did a lot of damage, knocking down trees just for the Hell of it, chasing the cars of tourists and generally raising Hell.

At that time, no large African elephants had ever been seen in this country, so I knew that I could find customers for these big bulls, believed that I could sell ten of them for about \$100,000.00 each. Quite a few babies had been imported into the United States, but all of these had been transported by air and thus were quite expensive, were then selling for about \$10,000.00 each; but by importing a hundred babies at a time, and transporting them by ship, I knew that I could sell them for less than half of the usual price and still make a profit.

In the animal business, in order to keep your costs down to a reasonable figure, you must import the animals in large numbers; the cost of a trip to get such animals will be about the same regardless of how many animals you get, so when animals are imported in small numbers they become very expensive. I had always been very successful in the animal business primarily because I always imported animals in large numbers, could usually sell them for less than other dealers spent to import them, and thus could find many customers who could not afford higher prices.

I once offered to sell another dealer any number of animals of any kind that he wanted at prices that were below what it would cost him for transportation alone. I could make that offer because he was going to import animals by air, in small numbers, while I intended to import them by sea in large numbers. Transportating them by air would have cost him more than \$2.00 per pound, while ship freight cost me about four cents per pound. So a big python weighing 250 pounds would weigh more than 300 pounds when crated for shipment, and would thus cost him more than \$600.00 just for it's transportation, while it would cost me about \$12.00 to transport the same snake by ship.

But the difference between air and ship costs was not the only factor that worked to my advantage: most of the other dealers in the United States bought their animals from overseas animal dealers, none of whom knew the difference between a python and a Palm tree, the result being that many of the animals that they shipped were in such terrible condition that they were utterly worthless, could not be resold. So a dealer in the United States might pay a dealer in India \$300.00 for a big python, then spend another \$700.00 for air freight and other related costs, only to find when the snake arrived that it was not worth a cent.

I did not work that way; instead, I personally selected each animal that was shipped, packed them for shipment myself, and paid much lower prices for them. So another dealer might spend \$1,000.00 to import a worthless snake while it cost me less than \$100.00 to import a good snake of the same size. Several dealers told me repeatedly that I could not do that, that if I imported them in such large numbers I would never be able to sell all of them; and, in a sense, they were right, I could not have sold all of them at the prices they were forced to charge, but had no trouble selling all of them at a much lower price that still gave me a large margin of profit. So when other dealers were charging \$1,500.00 for a large python, with little or nothing in the way of a profit, I could sell a similar snake for only \$500.00, a third of the price they were forced to charge, and with a clear profit to me of more than \$400.00.

I did exactly the same thing with all of the animals, birds, reptiles, tropical fish and even insects that I imported and sold; I imported thousands of large tarantula spiders from Mexico, and these became very popular pets. Some people will buy damned near anything in the way of exotic wildlife. Mexican tarantulas are very large, extremely colorful, usually will make no attempt to bite and are not capable of producing a dangerous bite even if they do bite you. In Kruger park there were large numbers of huge scorpions, some so big they looked like a lobster, and while these scorpions could deliver a very painful sting, perhaps a life-threatening sting, they also proved to be in great demand in this country.

Most people who buy exotic animals apparently are trying to show off, want to attract attention as a result of their unusual pets, so the more unusual the better. And if such pets are dangerous, so much the better.

So, if the elephant operation in Kruger was to be successful from my standpoint, I had to export large numbers of elephants; and, of course, Pienaar was violently opposed to that. A secondary consideration for me was the filming opportunity: I planned to produce one feature film that would run for at least two hours, in Cinemascope, and as many half-four television shows as possible, a minimum of ten television shows. And, again, Pienaar was opposed to my filming plans.

## The Arthur Jones Collection

In the end, as a result of Pienaar's efforts to hurt me, a golden opportunity was turned into an outright disaster; rather than making a profit of a couple of million dollars, or more, I ended up almost losing my ass.

Capturing and moving large adult elephants had never before been attempted, or so Pienaar believed, while, in fact, it had been done on a large scale for several thousand years: Hannibal crossed the Alps with adult African elephants thousands of years ago, or did so with one such elephant since all of his other elephants died on that trip; hundreds of other adult African elephants were used by many armies for the purpose of making war for a period of several centuries; and an elephant capture and training compound was established in the Belgian Congo about 1900, and those people captured hundreds of adult elephants.

All of which captures were made by people using nothing apart from their bare hands and large ropes, since capture drugs were unknown at the time; and since elephants grow very slowly, they captured only adults, did not have the time required to raise an elephant from a baby to an adult.

I have seen a long film that was produced in the Congo in the 1920s, showing the capture of several large adult African elephants; this operation was directed by a white man riding a horse, and was carried out by dozens of black men on foot. Carrying large coils of heavy rope across their shoulders, they would select a large bull in a herd, separate him from the rest of the herd, and then eventually anchor him to several large trees by attaching one end of a heavy rope to a hind leg and the other end to a tree. One man in front of the elephant, on foot, would attract the attention of the elephant while another man tied a rope to its hind leg.

Eventually, tied to several trees, the elephant would no longer be able to run away; then, at that point, the natives would bring in two tame elephants, with one man riding one animal and two men riding the other one. These two tame elephants would then squeeze the wild elephant between their bodies, and one would reach over and restrain the wild elephant's trunk with its trunk, while the second one would beat the wild elephant in the face with its trunk every time it offered any resistance. One man would then get on top of the wild elephant, and was protected by the two tame elephants.

Three days later, a native could ride the previously wild elephant as if it was a tame horse, would ride it down into a river and give it a bath. Inge Topperwein proved to be even better at controlling wild elephants, could take a wild elephant that Pienaar and his assistants were shit scared of, would approach only after it was knocked down by the capture drug, and lead it out into the bush like a tame dog within a period of only about two days after it was captured; would go for long walks in the bush holding the end of the elephants trunk in her hand like a leash on a dog, would then sit down on the ground and lean back against a tree and take a nap, and the elephant would stand there motionless while she was asleep, but always maintaining contact with her by touching her with the tip of its trunk.

Some elephants apparently believed that she was their mother, one tried to crawl into bed with her and another tried to get into a bathtub with her, which would have been a very tight fit indeed, and one refused to sleep unless it was touching her with its trunk, would instantly wake up if she moved. I believe that Inge could have taken the largest, wildest bull elephant in Africa and could have ridden it through the midst of an outright riot within a week after it was captured, and that the elephant would look neither to its right or left unless she told it to do so. So, far from being impossible to tame or train, as Pienaar believed, African elephants can be trained very quickly in captivity.

Indian elephants, of course, have been tamed and trained for thousands of years, but at the time of the Kruger operation all of the elephant 'experts' were convinced that African elephants could not be handled in a similar manner. Which is outright bullshit: a man who worked for me several years later is now conducting photo safaris in Africa, carrying tourists mounted on top of several large bull elephants. Some of his elephants were used in a Clint Eastwood film called *White Hunter, Black Heart*, and all of his elephants were captured by my crew.

As they say . . . "The difficult we can do immediately, the impossible takes a bit longer." I have been doing so-called 'impossible' things all of my life. Still have not learned how to communicate with most people, but have managed to do a lot of things in spite of a usual total lack of such communication.

In the end, because of Pienaar's efforts to hurt me, the number of elephants that we were permitted to capture was reduced from the planned number of 110 to only twenty, and all of those had to be young elephants, and if Pienaar had

"...And God Laughs"

## The Arthur Jones Collection

been given the choice of these all of them would have been of no value to me: the ones he wanted to catch were too large to be babies and too small to be adults, and I could sell only babies or adults. As planned initially, all of the elephants of a size that did not suit my purposes would have been moved to someplace else where elephants were wanted and then released.

Then, when it started to become obvious to Pienaar that we were going to be successful in spite of his efforts, he started doing everything possible to prevent us from filming the operation: posted men on the back of trucks that my cameramen were trying to film from and had these men start rocking the truck every time a camera started to run. Meantime, laughing and making jokes in Afrikaans, a language that they assumed we did not understand, but one that we did understand.

I instructed all of my camera operators to do everything possible in the direction of making it appear in the films that Pienaar was the hero of the films, hoping that this might help; which it did not. And since it appeared that Pienaar directed most of his hate in my direction, I stayed away during most of the capture operations; gave my crew careful instructions about just what I wanted to capture on film and hoped for the best while expecting the worst.

The result of this being that I got only about ten percent as much on film as I wanted to; the filming opportunities were certainly there, but Pienaar and his assistants saw to it that few of these opportunities could be utilized. Finally, in the face of an utter outrage, I told my crew . . . “Fuck it: let’s take our elephants and get to Hell out of here and just forget the filming.” But even that was not enough to satisfy Pienaar.

First, as mentioned in an earlier chapter, he tried to make it impossible for us to ship the elephants out of the park, and when he failed in that attempt he went a long way in another direction in his attempts to hurt me: A few days before we were scheduled to leave, Dolf Brynard, the Director of Kruger park, asked me to visit him in his office, and when I arrived in his office he was seated behind a big desk, with tears running down his face.

He then told me . . . “Arthur, I have been trying everything I could think of in attempts to make your trip a success; and I have continued to ignore all of the rumors that I have been hearing. But now the situation has gone much too far, and I can no longer ignore it.”

When I asked him just what he was talking about, since I did not have a clue, he said . . . “You have been accused of using your airplane to repeatedly buzz a large herd of adult elephants, causing them to stampede and threaten a number of tourist cars, and I cannot ignore that charge.”

On his desk he had a very large journal, a huge book that when closed measured about three feet tall by two feet wide, and was about six inches thick. Each page of that journal contained a record of everything that occurred in the park on a particular day; at the top of each page the day of the week, the date of the month and the year was printed in heavy letters. This journal was open on his desk and he showed me an entry that had been written on one page: According to that journal entry I was accused of a long list of crimes, including the one of buzzing herds of elephants and causing dangerous stampedes that endangered tourists. Included was a very accurate description of my airplane, together with the correct registration numbers of that airplane. And thirty-two members of the staff of Kruger park, including Pienaar, had signed that statement, claiming that they had been witnesses to my actions.

Having read that accusation, I turned to Dolf and said . . . “Alright, Dolf, I have been keeping my mouth shut too; and it is certainly true that a lot of crimes have been committed here, but not by me or by my people, so now I believe it is time for you to hear the truth. To begin with, on the day that all of those supposed witnesses saw me buzzing the elephants, that airplane was more than two thousand miles away from Kruger park, was in Southwest Africa, and at the very moment that I was supposed to be buzzing elephants here I was seated across the desk from the Prime Minister of that country, having gone there to visit him together with Jan Oelofse, who just happens to be the Prime Minister’s brother in law, and also accompanied by Jan’s wife and Eliza Steffee. And I can prove it: can produce dated hotel receipts, dated fuel purchase receipts, my flight log book, and statements from utterly unimpeachable witnesses including the Prime Minister. So now I am going to bring several members of my crew in here and let them tell you what has really been going on in the park.”

## The Arthur Jones Collection

And I did, and he listened in a state of outright shock, with tears running down his face throughout all of the statements made by my crew members.

Afterwards, alone again with me, he said . . . “I liked you from the first moment that I met you, Arthur, and I tried not to believe all of the stories that I have been hearing, but this last accusation was simply too much for me to ignore; but, now that I know the truth, I am fully prepared to do anything, literally anything, to make it up to you. If you want to kill any or all of those people on that list of supposed witnesses then be my guest, and if you decide to kill them I will help you, and we can damned sure do it in such a way that we will never get caught, will never even be accused of it. Secondly, from this moment on you can do any damned thing you want to, and I will help you do it, and will kill anybody that gives you a problem of any kind. You can start all over again, from scratch, capture as many elephants as you want to, elephants of any size, and we will pay all of your expenses, and Pienaar can go fuck himself as far as I am concerned, the man is obviously an outright lunatic.”

So I told him . . . “No, Dolf, my people have already had just about as much as they can stand, and regardless of anything that you try to do, short of killing Pienaar, he will still be able to cause us a lot of problems; but I will delay my departure for a few weeks if you will assign only one ranger to act as an assistant, a man to be selected by me, a man who will report only to you, who will not even discuss what we are doing with anybody else, not even his wife. If that is agreeable to you, I will try to use that time to make up for many of the filming opportunities that we were prevented from using during the actual operation by Pienaar and his buddies. But you must also somehow manage to keep Pienaar away from me, if he comes around I may end up killing him.”

And since I offered to accept far less than Dolf had offered in the way of assistance, he agreed. After which we finally did manage to get some worthwhile film, although nothing close to what I had originally expected. Most of our later filming was done in the north end of the park, about a hundred and fifty miles away from Pienaar’s office, and we never saw him again; in fact, saw very few rangers again apart from the one man that I selected to work with us, a man who had no authority over us, who acted only as an observer and a guide, but a man who gave us no problems of any kind. All of the rangers in the park were not lunatics, just most of them.

What, if any, action was ever taken against the thirty-two liars who signed that phony accusation against me was something I never learned; probably none, and since Pienaar was later promoted to Director of the park it did not appear that his insane actions hurt his career very much. At least one ranger, when called on the carpet and questioned by Dolf, admitted that he had lied, and offered no excuse for his lies.

Since there was no phone at the airfield near Skakuza, and since it was too far to walk from there to our camp, we always tried to have somebody meet us at the landing strip with a Landrover when we returned at night to Skakuza after working all day in the bush filming, and we had to reach the landing strip before dark because there were no lights on the field. You do not need lights on the ground in order to land in the dark, but you must at least be able to find the landing strip; and the lack of such lights on the ground almost got us killed one night.

We departed from a short and very rough strip near the north end of the park one day just before dark, and I had just enough remaining daylight to make it possible to reach the field near Skakuza before it became too dark to locate the field; or so I believed when I took off. But what I did not know was that I had a strong head wind from the south that slowed my speed to the point that I was unable to reach the field until well after full dark; and I also did not know that the field was then situated directly underneath a very heavy thunder storm, that it was raining like a cow pissing on a flat rock. But by the time I was aware of those two problems it was far too late to attempt to return to the landing strip that we departed from.

Eliza Steffee was supposed to meet us with a Landrover at the strip just before dark, but because of the very heavy rain she assumed that we would not be returning that evening and thus did not drive to the strip. So, when we finally arrived in the general area of the airport, we could not locate the runway, were able to find its approximate location only because of a few lights that we could see in Skakuza.

## The Arthur Jones Collection

Fortunately, and this saved our lives, two native game guards had driven out to the landing strip in a Landrover, intending to spend the night there in order to protect the airplane's tires from lions; and when they heard the sound of my engine, they turned on the lights of their vehicle, on and back off very quickly, but long enough for me to see their lights and then make an educated guess about the position of the runway. Then, assuming that they were parked in the same place where they usually parked, and estimating the location of the runway from that tiny bit of assumed information, I made an approach in utterly blind flying conditions, did not know how high I was above the ground, was merely hoping that the runway was where I assumed it was, and could not see out of the windshield because of the heavy rain.

Seated next to me was the manager from my bank in Natal, a friend who visited Kruger to see what we were doing, and he was about to get killed, or so it appeared to me, but remained totally unaware of our actual situation, sat there with a smile on his face throughout the whole thing. During that blind approach I was primarily worried about the possibility of large animals being on the runway, wondered if rain would attract them to the runway or drive them off; then tried to figure out whether it would be better to hit a giraffe at a high speed or at a slow speed. Finally decided that hitting one at a high speed would probably be better, because then, I thought, it would fall behind the airplane rather than falling on top of it.

But, as it happened, there were no animals on the runway, or at least we did not hit any, and I had judged the position of the runway very accurately, I landed on the centerline of the runway about a third of the way down its length; which outcome was largely a result of pure, blind luck rather than skill. I have made a few other landings that were probably equally dangerous, but not many. My asshole was trying to bite chunks out of my seat throughout that approach and landing, although I managed to control my facial expressions to the point that none of the passengers even suspected the danger.

Sometimes you find yourself in a situation where you have only one option, and must act upon it regardless of how dangerous it appears to be; which was exactly my position that night near Skakuza. I tried to consider every other possibility, but rejected them all; considered trying to fly to Johannesburg, but knew that I did not have enough fuel for that; considered turning around and, taking advantage of what would then have been a tail wind that would have extended my flying range, trying to reach Rhodesia, but knew that even with the help of a tail wind I still did not have enough fuel for such a long flight; considered trying for a major airport in Mozambique, which might have been close enough to reach, but rejected that option because I knew we might get shot down by a fighter plane if we flew into Mozambique without advance permission, since they had radar that was constantly on the alert because of ongoing warfare with the rebels.

So while none of my passengers were afraid during that approach and landing, I damned sure was, as they say . . . "There are old pilots and there are bold pilots, but there are no old, bold pilots."

I have managed to survive several major airplane crashes, none of them caused by me, but I was certainly not in a mood for another one that night. But, if I had crashed that night, it would have been my fault because of my poor judgment in the situation.