

And God Laughs...

The Arthur Jones Autobiography

www.ArthurJonesExercise.com

“Figures do not lie, but liars figure.”

Anon.

Never be dumb enough to believe statistics. I have yet to meet a supposed ‘expert’ in any field who could find his own ass, using both hands in his attempts, with a bright light and a sign pointing at the target, and with an Indian guide leading him by the hand.

Statistics originated in Russia, and when they first became known in this country the government sent somebody to Russia to learn all he could on the subject. Some Russian official led the American scientist by the hand through the entire matter; showed him first the conclusions that had been reached as a result of the final figures, and then led him step by step through the procedures that were required to produce those final figures, starting at the national level and working backwards down to the local village level.

But when the American asked the Russian where the starting statistics came from, he replied . . . “Oh, the village chief just writes down whatever he feels like.” Or, as they say in the field of computers . . . “GIGO; garbage in, garbage out.”

In an attempt to determine the best location for an animal exhibit that he planned to build in 1950, wanting to put it in the potentially most profitable location, which primarily meant the location with the most traffic, Bo Miller based his decision on government statistics. He learned from the ‘experts’ in Washington, D.C., that the heaviest level of traffic in this country was over the highway that joins southern Oklahoma with northern Texas, near Lake Texoma. So he built his exhibit there, expecting to do a land-office like business; and he did, for the first three days.

I don’t now remember the exact figures; but, hypothetically, say that one-hundred million cars went by that location every year, and assume that the figure was correct; but, the problem was, it was not one-hundred million different cars, instead it was only one-hundred cars passing that spot a million times each. Which might have been fine for business if he had been selling gasoline or food, but was not worth a damn for an exhibit; because very few people ever visit an exhibit more than once. So his business was very good during the first weekend that he was open, but then immediately afterwards dropped off to almost nothing.

But even when statistics are not misleading in the manner spelled out above, they can still get you into trouble; and four years later that happened to me. Most of the people then in the animal exhibit business believed that the best possible location that was not already being used was on highway 90 just to the east of Mobile, Alabama, on a man-made causeway near the Bankhead tunnel. A tunnel named after Tallulah Bankhead’s father, who was a well-known politician and all-round thief.

According to the statistics, there was more traffic passing by that spot than there was on any other east/west highway in the world, and there probably was. So I built a very nice exhibit there, a place I named the Mobile Zoo; opened the doors for business expecting to quickly get rich, but instead nearly starved to death. When I opened that place people all over the country were cursing and gnashing their teeth, pissed off because I got there first; but within a few weeks I was wishing that somebody had beat me to that location.

Cars went by in their millions, but that was the problem, they went by, did not stop; were afraid to stop, because the traffic flow was so heavy that most drivers were afraid that if they ever stopped it would then be very difficult to get back in to the flow of traffic. We had far too much traffic, which can be just as bad as too little, and was.

As usual, I had invested every cent that I had in the place, and had worked throughout the winter of 1953/54 to build the place with my own hands, pouring concrete, setting blocks, roofing the buildings and everything else that was required. Physically, I was in the best shape of my life, weighed 205 pounds stripped, in hard muscular condition with

The Arthur Jones Collection

almost no fat; but, in those days, I never wore short-sleeved shirts or anything else that might display my physique, did not want to attract that kind of attention.

Ray Olive, Bo Miller's co-pilot during the war, was my junior partner, did not have any of his money invested in the place but did work hard helping me build the exhibit. While building it, Ray and I stayed in a room in the YMCA in Mobile, and would take a shower in the public washroom of the Y every evening after we quit working for the day. Two men who worked for a company that sold and installed Cyclone fencing were staying there as well, and when the younger of these two men saw me stripped he asked me what kind of work I did, probably assuming that my physique was a result of my job.

Whereupon, the older man looked at the younger one with an expression that clearly indicated that he considered him to be a fool, and said . . . "I don't know what kind of work he does, but whatever it is it would kill you."

Everywhere I went in those days I built an exercise machine, and I had been in hard training for nearly a year, but always trained alone because nobody that I had ever met was willing to train as hard as I did. My workouts were nothing short of brutal and every single person who tried to follow me through a workout ended up vomiting and passing out from shock within a few minutes.

A fourteen-year-old boy whose father owned a fishing camp that was near our exhibit used to hang around and watch my workouts, and he came over one day with tears running down his face to tell me that he would never see me again; because he was planning to run away from home. When I asked him why, he showed me a letter that he had received from Charles Atlas, a mimeographed threatening letter that had been sent to him because he was behind on his payments for a Charles Atlas exercise program that he had ordered. The letter said . . . "Mr. Atlas will be in your town in the near future, and would not like to be forced to come around and collect your badly overdue payments personally."

So the kid believed that Atlas was going to come there and beat the shit out of him in order to collect a few dollars; but I managed to convince him that I could protect him if Atlas did show up. Which, of course, he never did.

The month of July should have been the best month of the year, and was; but best is a relative term, best compared to what? Our gross income for July was \$800.00, which was barely enough to feed all of our animals, with nothing left over to feed us or pay any of our other expenses. During the following December, the worst month for business, our gross income was just \$3.00, which meant that only four people went through the place that month. By which point I clearly understood that we had to get to Hell out of there; but we had two problems: were down to our last few dollars and had no place to go, could not leave and could not stay.

Then I found out that the situation was even worse than I had realized; most of the money that I had invested to build the place came from the sale of my exhibit near Slidell, Louisiana. I sold that place to a junior partner who was a veterinarian named Owen Baker, but he could not pay me in cash; so he gave me a brand new Oldsmobile that he had just purchased and was making monthly payments on, plus a large number of post-dated checks; I took those checks to a bank in Oklahoma and used them as collateral for a large loan. Baker was supposed to pay off those checks to the bank on a weekly basis, as well as making the car payments; but did neither. But he would not tell either the bank or the car dealer where I was, told them he did not know; so, since I never heard from either of them, I assumed that Baker was making the payments regularly.

Ray Olive had another nearly new car and we had a large panel truck, but did not have anything large enough to haul all of our animals away, and had no place to take them. Based upon the income produced by the Slidell exhibit the previous year, Baker should have been easily capable of making all of the agreed payments; but as soon as I left he started taking off every Saturday and Sunday, the two biggest days of the week, and would go to work late and leave early on the other days. He had hired two carnival people, an old man and his wife, who were so crooked that they could no longer find work with any carnivals in the country, and had them running the place; and they were stealing him blind. Before Baker became associated with me he told me . . . "We will work until we drop." Maybe, but he dropped rather quickly, was one of the laziest people I ever met.

I stopped by the Slidell exhibit for a brief visit shortly before the Mobile place was opened, and at the time had no reason to suspect that Baker had made none of the agreed payments; but as I stepped out of the office door that led to

"...And God Laughs"

The Arthur Jones Collection

the inside of the exhibit Baker was starting into a large pit full of rattlesnakes, leading a group of tourists and intending to conduct a rattlesnake milking demonstration.

But when he saw me he went into an instant state of shock, literally was so frightened that he did not know what he was doing; walked directly up to a large rattlesnake which promptly bit him on the leg. I suppose he assumed that I had learned about his failure to make the payments.

So I immediately dragged him out of the snake pit and started treating his snake bite; speed being important, you should start cutting and sucking as quickly as possible.

Then, afterwards, Baker's new wife, a woman I had never met before, was much too lavish in her praise of my actions; overdid her thanks to such an extent that it was immediately obvious to me that Baker had been telling her horror stories about me, and that made me suspicious because I had always treated Baker very well. Her statements made it apparent that she had been surprised by my treatment of Baker, had probably expected me to stand there and laugh while Baker died from the bite. But I still did not know what had been going on, or not going on, simply knew that something was wrong. Much later I learned that in addition to not making the payments to the bank and the car dealer Baker had borrowed a lot of money from a man in Slidell named H. A. Davis, and was then behind on payments to him as well.

And in the meantime the exhibit was rapidly going to Hell, he had sold as many of the animals as he could, did not maintain the place and the cages were all filthy. I always maintained an animal exhibit so that it was as clean as an operating room in a hospital, with no bad odors of any kind. But many people who went into such a place apparently expected it to smell bad, would start sniffing in an attempt to identify a bad smell. That always irritated me, so when they did that I would look them in the eyes and say . . . "There is nothing dead, that's me that you smell."

I told one old man that and he looked back at me and said . . . "I can understand that, I've had the same problem all my life." But I could not think of an appropriate response.

During the first few days of January, 1955, using a large rented truck, we loaded up all of the animals in Mobile and hauled them to a fish and turtle farm located in southern Mississippi, a place operated by a friend of mine. It was not a very good place to put them but we had no other choice.

On one trip hauling animals our cash had dropped to the point that I had only twenty-five cents, and knew that I needed that to pay the toll charged for crossing a bridge; but when we stopped at the toll booth the guy running it insisted that we had to pay thirty-five cents, that the toll was higher for a truck. He refused to let us pass, insisted that we would have to turn around and go back; but reaching our intended destination by any other route would have required a trip of over four-hundred miles, and we did not have enough fuel for that. So I stepped out of the truck and told the guy inside the toll booth to come outside, told him . . . "Well, I may have to turn around, but I'm going to whip your ass first."

So he loaned us the required dime.

The next day we managed to get at least some money by selling a few of our alligators to C. C. McClung, and that prevented us from starving.

I had a wife and two small children, and Ray Olive had a wife and two children as well, and while Ray had a large house trailer I had no place to stay, had to try to scrounge a room from one of my friends in the area, which I hated to do; I have usually had other people living in my home, but never liked to stay in another person's home. The only exception to that being the fact that when in Miami I always stayed in Ralph Demers' home.

Another man then living in Miami, Ray Perez, was a drug smuggler, although I did not even suspect that at the time, and he was importing enormous numbers of animals and reptiles from Iquitos, Peru, as a front to conceal his drug smuggling activities. He had rented a former barracks located on what had been a military airfield during the war, built large cages inside the building and used them to hold his animals; then made little or no attempt to sell them; he brought them in by the thousands and then they died by the thousands. Briefly he employed a woman named Marty Latham who was supposed to sell the animals; but she did something less than nothing, and after they finally got around to

The Arthur Jones Collection

firing her they discovered thousands of letters that had never even been opened. She was crazy, and Ralph Demers called her the Titleless Wonder. Among other stunts, she asked a friend of mine, Roy Pinney, to permit her young daughter to stay in Roy's home for a weekend so that she could make a brief trip out of town; then did not show up again, or even call, for more than twelve years. When she finally did show up again her daughter did not even remember her.

In retrospect, I feel very stupid for not having realized just what Perez was doing, because the way he was running his animal business appeared to be utterly insane. Nevertheless this provided me with an opportunity; so I went to Miami and made a deal with Perez, asked him to literally give me the animals free. Then promised to send him half of everything I sold them for.

So then Ray Olive and I purchased a very old school bus without an engine, bought an engine from a junk yard for \$15.00 and rebuilt it ourselves and installed it in the bus; then ripped out all of the seats except the driver's seat and built cages down both sides of the interior of the bus, cages stacked above one another from the floor of the bus to the ceiling and with only a very narrow aisle down the middle of the bus between the cages.

We could haul several hundred monkeys and a wide variety of other animals in the bus; we filled all of the cages with animals from Perez's place in Miami and set out for Los Angeles, stopping along the way at pet shops, animal exhibits and zoos in order to sell the animals. And we sold the entire bus load of animals relatively quickly, primarily because the customers could see what they were getting, and liked what they saw.

For the first trip we selected 200 squirrel monkeys from a total of 1,100 then in the cages in Miami, leaving 900 behind; and out of the 200 that we took we sold 193, six died and one escaped. But when we returned to Miami about two weeks later we found that all but a dozen of the 900 left behind had died, and they had sold none while we were away. Squirrel monkeys require a very specific diet, they need meat as well as fruits and vegetables, and love to eat insects; but Perez was feeding them nothing apart from bananas. We fed ours meal worms, chameleon lizards, ground horse meat and a wide variety of fruits, and they thrived on it, steadily gained weight while the ones left in Miami were starving.

But not to worry about the lack of animals in Miami upon our return, because another big load came in a few days later, with 1,100 more squirrel monkeys, several hundred other monkeys of different types and a variety of other animals and reptiles. Most of which, apart from those we hauled away, would simply sit there in the cages and starve to death.

Perez had a cousin who owned a small Latin American airline and he hauled only cargo, and hauled only southbound cargo, had no return loads, came back empty to Miami after every trip to South America, so he hauled all of the animals for Perez free. Which undoubtedly added a bit to his fuel costs but apart from that cost him literally nothing; and, in those days, gas for airplanes in South America was almost free, cost somewhere from 9 cents a gallon to 16 cents a gallon, depending upon which country you bought it in.

The animals cost Perez damned near nothing in Peru at the time so his actual expenses were quite low; but nearly forty years later I have still not been able to figure out just why he imported the animals in such huge numbers. For the purpose of concealing his drug smuggling activities it would appear that a lot fewer animals would have accomplished the same thing. Perez had a cousin named Joe Renado who was a pilot for the airline they were using and who was also involved in the drug smuggling; Renado was eventually convicted and went to prison for drug smuggling but I don't know what happened to Perez.

Perez was married and had several children, both his wife and kids living in Miami, but he had another home in Iquitos, Peru, and he married a young girl there; in order to accomplish that he had to bribe a priest who knew that Perez had a family in Miami, bribed him with a new car that he took down in the airplane they were using. Making that priest the only person in that city with a new car; most of the other cars there were at least twenty years old and many were more than thirty years old.

An Englishman named Ian Rokes was then living in Iquitos, was in the tropical fish business and hated Perez; had previously been involved somehow with Perez in business and did not like the way things turned out. So when the

The Arthur Jones Collection

priest was trying to figure out whether or not he could get away with performing a bigamous wedding, he went to talk with Rokes, in an attempt, he said, to determine if Perez was 'really' married in Miami.

Rokes told the priest that he knew damned well that Perez already had a wife, because the priest had visited Perez's house and had met his wife and kids. So then the priest said . . . "But do they sleep in the same bed?"

And Rokes said . . . "Well, they sleep in the same room, and there is only one bed in the room."

So then the priest asked Rokes . . . "But do they have sexual relations?"

Whereupon Rokes said . . . "I have never been a mattress."

So the priest performed the wedding anyway, hoping that Rokes would keep his mouth shut about the true situation; which he did not do, naturally, so the story spread all over town very quickly. I later saw Perez's new wife only once, and she was far from friendly, so don't know what she thought about the situation.

We made a number of trips to California hauling the animals that we got from Perez in Miami, and made quite a lot of money from those trips, although we more than earned every cent of it; trying to sleep on the floor of the bus between the rows of cages while hundreds of monkeys are pissing on you is not inducive to much in the way of rest. The bus had no heater so we tried to use a kerosene stove and that added more in the way of smoke than it did in the way of heat. The smell in the bus after the first few days of a trip left quite a bit to be desired as well; upon returning from each trip we would have to throw all of our clothes away, because it was impossible to get rid of their strong smell.

A big snake died inside a box during one trip, and the smell from that was simply overpowering, although it came on so gradually that we did not even notice it over the other strong odors until we were stopped by a policeman at a check point going into California; he opened the door of the bus, and immediately said . . . "My God, what the fuck is that smell?" Then instantly turned away and started vomiting.

I looked at him and said . . . "What smell?"

But after I got out of the bus for a few minutes I found that it was all but impossible to get back inside the bus again.

Ian Rokes later acted as my agent in Iquitos for buying animals when I went into competition with Perez there, and I planned to bring him to this country for a visit; but had a bit of a problem with that, because practically half of the words that came out of his mouth were fuck or fucking. So I told him that saying that word in polite society in this country might get him into trouble; that if he said that in front of a woman somebody might punch him out.

Whereupon he said . . . "I never said fuck in front of a woman in my life."

So I asked him . . . "Is your wife a woman? You say it in front of her almost constantly."

Then he said . . . "I have never said fuck in front of my wife."

And, almost instantly, his wife came around a corner, walked up to us and said . . . "Are you guys about ready to fuck off for some fucking chow?"

He was also a stubborn bastard; since he had a lot of knowledge about paint from his experience with boats, I asked him which kind of paint would be best for painting my motion-picture cameras white. Then he asked me why I wanted to paint them white. And when I told him that doing so would keep the camera cooler and would thus serve to protect the film, which would sometimes literally melt from the heat of the sun on a black camera, he told me in no uncertain terms that painting them white would make no difference. Offered to bet me on the subject.

Later, when he visited me in Louisiana, I took him with me when I went to film a television commercial for a local Chevrolet dealer; the weather was very cold but the sun was shining brightly. So I remembered that previous discussion with Rokes and then put one hand on a car with a black top and my other hand on a car with a white top. The black one almost burned my hand, while the white one was very cold. The difference in temperature was probably greater than a hundred degrees.

The Arthur Jones Collection

So I asked Rokes to do the same thing, and he did; but then insisted that there was no difference, that both cars felt the same to him. And said that when one hand was practically smoking and the other was almost freezing. But he could never bring himself to admit that he was wrong about anything.

I have found such an attitude to be very common.

Really useful maps of the interior of South American did not exist at that time, so on one flight Perez's cousin did what we called 'finding a new mountain' one night; flew his airplane into the side of a mountain that was much higher than his map said it was and killed himself. Joe Renado was not on that flight but that brought the free transportation arrangement to a halt. So other arrangements had to be made.

A man named Everett Jones (no relation) was operating another Latin American airline using the same kind of airplanes, Curtiss C 46 transports that were designed to carry cargo over the 'hump' into China during the war; they had an enormous fuselage, were fairly fast and could carry up to 14,000 pounds of cargo, yet could be landed on very small and rough strips, and could reach a very high altitude, which was a requirement for flying in the interior of South America. The Andes mountains of western South America are among the highest in the world. To fly from Iquitos to Lima, Peru, you had to climb to at least 25,000 feet and even at that altitude were barely above the tops of the mountains. Crashes in those mountains were fairly frequent and were invariably fatal for everybody on board the plane. I lost a lot of friends in those mountains, including two of the most beautiful young women I ever met.

One of the fields that we used in Peru was at a place called Pucalpo, and the field was tiny, only 2,300 feet long and situated at an altitude of 6,500 feet above sea level, and hot, which meant that the air was very thin; which increases the requirements for runway length. This field was situated in a blind canyon and was surrounded by high mountains.

You had to land towards the north regardless of wind direction and take off towards the south; and once started an approach for a landing could not be aborted, there was no room to turn around and it would have been impossible to climb over the mountain just beyond the end of the runway.

The only factor that made the field usable by our large airplanes was the slope of the runway; as you touched down upon landing you were going up a rather steep hill; then, during your takeoff run, you were helped by the fact that you were rolling downhill. But if you were not yet going fast enough to fly when you ran off the end of the runway during a takeoff it did not really matter, because that end of the runway was on the edge of a very high cliff, so when you ran out of runway you had more than a mile of clear space below you, and that was more than enough to get your speed up high enough to fly.

A friend of mine had a simultaneous brake and engine failure when landing there which caused him to lose control of the plane and knock over the control tower together with a stone fence. He had a cargo of pure alcohol and gasoline in glass bottles, and one passenger, an old woman. All of the bottles broke from the crash so the fuselage of the plane was literally almost full to the ceiling with alcohol, gasoline and broken glass pieces by the millions.

The door to the cockpit was impossible to open because of all the shit piled up on the other side of it, so to escape the cockpit the pilots had to cut their way through the door with an ax; then found that they could not lift the old woman out of her seat, finally figured out that her seat belt was still fastened and eventually got her loose.

A large part of the ground around where they crashed was about a foot deep in both alcohol and gasoline, and naturally about two-hundred Indians were standing there nervously smoking their cigarettes while standing in a foot or so of highly explosive fluids; but the plane did not explode or burn, which was practically a miracle, and nobody was badly hurt. The plane, of course, was ruined, and is probably still sitting there with a few Indians living inside of it.

Another friend of mine from Kentucky was killed in a similar crash close by, together with more than forty passengers and the two beautiful girls I mentioned earlier, who were the stewardesses on that plane; one was a blond German girl and the other was a brunette from Lima, and they were quite a pair. What a waste. That crash occurred because the pilot was lost; the pilot of another airplane heard him talking on the radio and realized from the conversation that the pilot of the plane that crashed was not located where he believed he was. Then tried to warn him, but it was too late.

The Arthur Jones Collection

The pilot who crashed had reported that he was over a certain spot and that he was flying through heavy clouds with zero visibility; but the other pilot who heard him was actually over the spot mentioned and the weather was clear; but he could see heavy clouds towards the west, in the mountains, and knew what was about to happen.

Later, when I started flying my own C 46 out of Iquitos, we had to take off about two in the morning in order to arrive in Miami early enough to avoid having to pay the Customs people overtime, which was expensive; but there was always a blind fog at that time of night because the airport was located right next to the Amazon river; so we would have to tow the airplane out onto the runway with a tractor because we could not see to taxi, line up the plane with the centerline of the runway and then make a blind zero-zero takeoff, zero ceiling and zero visibility. Which is not difficult to do so long as nothing goes wrong; but, once moving, you cannot stop regardless of what happens; and, once off the ground, you cannot go back. My copilot on those flights would always ask me to permit him to take a pull out of a whiskey bottle just before I started the takeoff roll, and I always let him do it although I did not drink myself.

We were just about to start a takeoff roll one night when I suddenly felt a hand on my shoulder from behind, and since I believed that there were only two of us on the plane I thought that perhaps a large jaguar had escaped from its cage; but it was a German man who asked me in his pitiful Spanish just where his seat was located, said he could not find it. Then showed me a ticket to Miami that a man named Borgas had sold him.

But we had no seats for passengers on the plane. So we had to feel our way like blind men to the terminal, get a seat, take it back and bolt it down onto the floor of the plane. And Borgas, the agent, got bent out of shape because my copilot called him a meathead in English, which he did not understand; so he was running around wildly trying to find out what the word meant.

When I asked him why he sold the German a ticket to Miami, he said . . . "Well, you are running an airline, aren't you?" Which we were, but we had not intended to haul passengers. But it worked out well in the end, that German was from Ecuador and he later got me a large number of giant Galapagos tortoises, which were very valuable.

I took a kid from New Orleans down to Iquitos to run my compound there, a young man who was an outright giant, just under seven feet tall and quite heavy, and since most of the Peruvians there were very small he looked like Gulliver in the land of tiny people. And he lived about two seconds behind real time, did not notice anything until at least two seconds after it happened; thus he would walk down the street, knock down a small man and not even notice it until about two seconds later, then suddenly whirl around to help his first victim while running over several other people. After a few days all of the people there avoided him like the plague.