

# And God Laughs...

## The Arthur Jones Autobiography

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**“Rattlesnakes will not, as most people believe, attack you; but they damned sure will try to protect themselves, so if you get bit it is usually your own damned fault. If somebody was beating me on the head with a club, I would try to protect myself as well.”**

**R. E. Laidlaw**

Sometime in the mid 1930s, the city of San Antonio, Texas, built what they called the Reptile Gardens in Brackenridge park, next door to the Witte Museum. The city did not operate the gardens themselves, instead leased it to private citizens who operated the gardens and charged the public for admission. The gardens quickly became a major tourist attraction and was visited by most of the local people as well. They conducted so-called rattlesnake ‘milking’ demonstrations every few minutes throughout the day and on Sunday afternoons served the visitors with small portions of cooked rattlesnake meat. The snakes were killed, skinned, prepared and cooked in plain sight of the Sunday visitors and this usually attracted large crowds of people every Sunday.

While he was not the first person to operate the gardens, by the time I was aware of this attraction it was being operated by a man named R. E. Laidlaw, a widower then in his late fifties with a very attractive young daughter. Later, I fucked her literally while he fucked me figuratively; in 1947 he sold me the place, and I paid him for it, only to learn later that he did not own it, simply had a lease that was about to expire and that the city was not willing to renew. His daughter was certainly attractive, but she was not that attractive.

Taking people at face value has been getting me in trouble throughout my life, but it was a habit that I was seemingly unable to break; we tend to judge other people by ourselves, and that is frequently a mistake. I have concealed many things from other people throughout most of my life, lies of omission perhaps, but seldom used lies of commission; and I usually assumed that other people did the same thing. Have learned, however, to be very suspicious of people who tell you just how honest they are; but usually learned that far too late to do me much good.

The gardens consisted primarily of a very large concrete enclosure with walls around an area about a hundred feet long and fifty feet wide, constructed in a long oval shape. Inside this pit they usually had several hundred snakes and a few relatively small alligators; the show put on for visitors consisted of a man walking around inside the pit with the snakes; letting the snakes strike at and puncture inflated balloons that the man held in his hand while the snakes struck at them. Visitors were also permitted to touch or handle harmless snakes if they wanted to, and many did. During the relatively brief period that I operated the place, I sold more than 2,000 baby boa constrictors to visitors for \$2.50 each; baby snakes that I had earlier considered to be worthless and had released into the wild.

The gardens were open six days a week, Tuesday through Sunday, but were closed on Mondays, or on days when the weather was very bad since there was no roof over the big snake pit; and that sometimes caused a problem. The alligators liked to eat the snakes, but quickly learned that trying to do so during daylight hours would get them a blow on the head from a heavy stick, which they did not like; so afterwards did all of their snake eating at night when nobody was there to stop them.

To prevent that from happening, large steel bins were constructed to hold the alligators during the night; and, very quickly, the alligators learned just what was expected of them, and as closing time approached they would come up out of a small pool of water, walk to the holding bins and crawl inside. Then all you had to do was close the door of the bin and lock it. On Mondays, when the gardens were closed, the alligators remained quietly inside the bins, clearly understanding that doing so was a requirement on those days; but if the gardens were closed on any day except a Monday, the alligators would almost always break out of the bins and then start eating snakes. It appeared that they could tell time and knew the day of the week.

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Some kinds of snakes are cannibalistic, will eat other snakes if given the chance, so the selection of just what kind of snakes to keep in the big pit had to be carefully considered; and a few types of snakes that are not cannibalistic will nevertheless kill any other type of snake that they encounter, for no apparent reason. The so-called Mexican Cantil, a relative of the American Cottonmouth Moccasin, is particularly bad about killing other snakes, but never eats them.

Most supposed experts on snakes believe that a rattlesnake is immune to his own venom, will not be hurt if he bites himself; but in fact they are not immune to their own venom; although sometimes appear to be because it usually takes several days for the venom to kill them; and because they do not always inject any venom when they bite themselves. Even when biting a human a rattlesnake does not inject any venom into the wound about forty percent of the time, produces a so-called 'dry' bite, fang punctures that are harmless if no venom is injected. Which is one of several reasons why there is so much controversy on the subject of medical treatment for snake bites; in about forty percent of all rattlesnake bites there will be no bad effects with or without treatment, and in at least half of the bites where venom is injected there will not be enough of it to cause a fatal result. So most snake bite victims will recover almost regardless of what you do in the way of treatment; and in the rather rare case where a fatal amount of venom is injected, cutting and sucking of the injection sites will reduce the fatality rate to almost zero. Many treatments now being used for snake bites are far more dangerous than the bite itself.

Rattlesnake venom is intended to quickly kill an animal the size of a rabbit or smaller, and will; but a man in much larger than a rabbit and it takes a lot more venom to kill him; rattlesnakes usually have enough venom to kill several men, but seldom inject more than the amount required to kill a rabbit. In any case, when they do bite they are not trying to kill you; instead, are simply trying to get you to leave them alone. A rattlesnake has nothing to gain by killing you, since he cannot eat you, and will never endanger himself by trying to bite you; will do everything possible in an attempt to avoid having to bite you, will bite only when you give him no other choice. If people were as good neighbors as rattlesnakes are we would have a much safer society; and rattlesnakes are now protected in several states, while still being killed on sight in most states, and being commercially exploited in a few states.

Shortly before leaving San Antonio after having 'sold' me the reptile gardens, Laidlaw's daughter went snake hunting with me and two other people, an Army captain and his wife. We were hunting harmless water snakes that night in a small river that was dried up except for a few remaining pools of water; but these pools were literally alive with snakes, and we caught so many that we did not have enough cloth sacks to hold them. So we removed almost all of our clothes, stripped down to our underwear, tied knots in our pants legs and shirt sleeves and used these to hold more snakes.

Back on the highway, enroute back to San Antonio, we passed a hitch-hiker who screamed an obscenity at us when we failed to stop and pick him up; so I told the driver to go over a small hill in front of us, turn around and pass the hitch-hiker going in the opposite direction, go over another hill beyond him, turn around again and head back towards San Antonio. I figured that if we turned around out of his sight, he would assume that it was a different car when we approached him going in the same direction for the second time.

So we slowed down, but did not stop, maintained a speed that he could match by running slowly alongside the car; I had lowered my window but had the door locked, so he tried but failed to open my door, and then I said to him . . . "Here, let me help you, this door is hard to open; hold this for me and I will open the door so you can get in." Then I handed him a large water snake, and he took it because he could not see what it was in the dark. These snakes are not poisonous, but they do bite like Hell; and their saliva contains a chemical that produces very free bleeding even from a tiny wound because it temporarily prevents the blood from coagulating, and thus a scratch will initially appear to be a serious wound.

As soon as he took the snake, we roared off, leaving him there in the dark with a snake in his hands; which I hoped would stop him from screaming insults at passing cars in the future. I could have stopped and given him a beating, but assumed a snake bite in the middle of the night would leave a more lasting impression. Such bites never become infected, probably because the free bleeding cleans out the wound, so I knew that he would suffer no real damage.

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Some people handling snakes in captivity for an audience make a routine practice of letting harmless snakes bite them, thereby creating a very dramatic but harmless effect. People that I have known who did this were bitten by harmless snakes many thousands of times, but never got an infection or other lasting ill effects. And the wounds are so small that no scarring it produced by most harmless snake bites; although a bite by a large boa constrictor or python can produce scarring because of the far greater size of their teeth. A bite on the face by a large python might kill you as a result of the free bleeding that would be produced both by the size of the teeth and their saliva. A big anaconda bit me on the right thumb about thirty years ago and I lost nearly a quart of blood before I could stop the bleeding, and still have a large scar on that thumb.

I made a lot of money in 1947 in spite of what Laidlaw cheated me out of, so when I discovered that I did not own the reptile gardens I left San Antonio; decided to travel to several places of interest with no regard for any potential profit. I had met a lot of girls all over the country during the war and decided it was about time to look them up again; so I spent several months going all over the country and during the first few months of 1948 did some flight instruction in Oklahoma; having selected that spot primarily because I knew a lot of girls that I had met there both during and before the war. Then, in the spring of 1948, I opened an animal and reptile exhibit near Carlsbad Caverns, in New Mexico; but that did not last long either, because the location was too isolated for me to carry on my business of selling snakes and animals.

So the fall of 1948 found me in Tulsa, Oklahoma, where both the Jews and the Arabs tried to recruit me as a fighter pilot for their then ongoing war; I considered, but rejected, offers from both sides, because I did not trust either side. Which turned out to have been one of my few wise decisions; because friends who went with both sides never got paid, and some got killed.

While in Tulsa, I built the first prototype of a Nautilus machine; the first of many later prototypes that did not provide the answers to the questions I was trying to solve until twenty years later; but which eventually led to the establishment of Nautilus Sport/Medical Industries, Inc., a company that revolutionized the field of exercise initially, and later led me to where I am now, in the field of medical testing and rehabilitation.