

And God Laughs...

The Arthur Jones Autobiography

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“Birds of a feather flock together.”

Anon.

One of the things that I learned from the Miller brothers is the fact that appearance is frequently more important than substance; they always drove new and expensive cars and used these primarily as ‘bait’ for the purpose of attracting tourists driving expensive cars, who were far more likely to stop at one of their free zoos if they saw several other expensive cars parked there. People driving a Cadillac would seldom stop at a place where they saw only older or cheaper cars already parked; and you could count on it: if you had a new Cadillac parked in front of your place then several people driving similar cars would stop every day.

For a period of several years, importation duties on new cars shipped to Mexico were very high while such duties on used cars were much lower, and that situation provided me with the use of new cars at almost no cost to me; a friend of mine in Laredo, Texas, was a Cadillac dealer who found it very difficult to sell new cars in Mexico but who had a ready market for used cars, particularly for used Cadillacs. If a new Cadillac then sold for \$4,500.00 in this country, then a Mexican customer would be forced to pay \$9,000.00 for one; but if the car had been used for six months or so, then it could be purchased in Mexico for about \$6,000.00, including the importation duties collected by the Mexican Government. So I made a deal with the dealer in Laredo that permitted me to drive a new Cadillac for six months and then trade it on another new one for a difference of only \$200.00; and, during that period of a few months, I would drive the cars an average of more than 50,000 miles.

In one period of less than seven years I purchased a total of thirteen new cars in that fashion, and drove them 670,000 miles. I bought a new Cadillac on the first day of August, 1955, and put 18,600 miles on it during the first month, an average of 600 miles a day; when I traded that car in, after using it for only five months, it had been driven 68,000 miles. Most of which driving involved pulling a large trailer for the purpose of hauling snakes and other reptiles. It was a one-way distance of about 700 miles from my place in Slidell, Louisiana, to the location of my snake hunters in southern Texas and about 900 miles to Miami, Florida, where we picked up snakes coming in from South America, and we made hundreds of trips back and forth to both places.

We always drove very fast, even when pulling a heavy trailer, and with two drivers we could switch back and forth on such trips, with one man sleeping in the back seat while the other man drove, so we seldom stopped except to eat or buy fuel. A round trip to visit my hunters in Texas required less than two full days and a round trip to Miami took only a few hours more. We usually picked up about 3,000 pounds of snakes on each trip, primarily rattlesnakes from Texas and boa constrictors from Miami. During an average month we would haul, and later sell, an average of about 12,000 pounds of both rattlesnakes and boa constrictors, at a selling price of \$2.00 per pound; so these sales generated an income of about \$48,000.00 a month and more than half of it was net profit.

During that same period we usually operated one or more trucks and a number of airplanes for the same purpose; so to say that we traveled a lot would be a gross understatement. Later, after I got started in the film business, we made a lot of trips for filming purposes, and I made many trips to Hollywood in connection with my film business. Briefly, in the mid-1950s, when NASCAR started holding races on the beach in Daytona Beach, Florida, I got a racing license and entered some of my cars in stockcar races there; but that was done merely for fun rather than for profit, because we really had no chance to win such races while competing with racing teams that were financed by major automobile companies like Ford and Chrysler. One year I intended to enter the Pan American Road Race, a distance of 1,900 miles from the Guatemalan border to the Texas border, and I tried to get Earl Brockelsby to finance me for that race while going along as my co-driver; but he said . . . “Do you think I’m crazy?” His comment resulting from the fact that this race from one end of Mexico to the other was the most dangerous race then being held anywhere in the world.

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So then I told him . . . “Well, I just assumed that anybody who was dumb enough to go down a ski-jump ramp on a bobsled would consider the Pan American Road Race to be a piece of cake.” But having broken his back on that bobsled run, Earl was not in the mood for any more adventures.

Many years earlier, in 1934, we moved into a house on Highland Street in Seminole, Oklahoma, and the people who lived next door to us had a large, two-story garage building that was stuffed to the roof with rabbit skins; the youngest son of the family, David Noe, told me that they were waiting for the price of the rabbit skins to go back up before selling them. If so, they are probably still waiting sixty years later, because those rabbit skins actually had no value; were, instead, only bait for a massive con game that was later repeated on an even larger scale with both chinchilla and nutria skins.

The people running these con games advertised widely in both newspapers and magazines; saying things like . . . “Big profits within a short period of time and in return for a small investment. A business that can be operated from your home.”

When people responded to these advertisements they would be visited by a man who would first tell them how easy it was to earn big profits raising rabbits, chinchillas or nutria, and would offer to provide them with a written guarantee that his company would buy all of the skins that they could produce. Then would tell them that his company would sell them all of the breeding stock, cages and food that would be required. Having convinced the potential customer that he was providing them with an enormous opportunity, the salesman would then tell them the price of their required investment; and having already determined a reasonable estimate of the customers’ net worth, the salesman would then give them a price that he knew was impossible for them to pay. If, for example, he assumed that they had a total of \$2,000.00 to invest, then he would give them a price of \$10,000.00 or more.

Why? Because it is much easier to convince people of the value of something if they are not in a position to buy it; thus no decision on their part is required, and they are then usually left with the impression that they have been forced to miss out on a great opportunity because of a lack of money. All of which is based upon a common reaction: many people want things that they know they cannot afford.

But then, having first sold the customer on the value of the investment, and then having made it impossible, the salesman would then make it possible for them to invest. Would tell them that if they invested only \$2,000.00, in return for two pairs of chinchillas, a couple of wire cages and about 100 pounds of chinchilla food, his company would loan them ten more pairs of chinchillas together with the required cages and food, and would then give them half of the money produced by selling the skins from the offspring of the loaned animals. All of which skins his company would buy, of course.

To the customer, it appeared that they were taking possession of at least \$12,000.00 worth of breeding animals in return for an investment of only \$2,000.00; but, in fact, the chinchillas were actually worth only about a dollar each, while the wire cages cost less than five dollars and the food only a few dollars more. The total value of everything they got was less than \$100.00.

Then, later, when it came time for the company to buy any skins that they produced, it would always turn out that their skins were somehow damaged and were therefore worthless. The people operating this con game went to great lengths in efforts to convince the public that chinchilla skins were very valuable, and were able to get the national media to give them a lot of very valuable publicity in that direction. They would hold sales in places like Madison Square Garden, in New York, and during these sales tens-of-thousands of skins were supposedly sold while in fact none were actually sold; all of the salesmen and supposed buyers at these sales were employees of the people who were conducting this massive con game.

When the truth finally started to leak out, they moved their operations to England, Australia and Africa looking for more suckers, and they found them in great numbers for at least a few years. In 1959, in Kenya, Bill Carpenter and I spent one night in the home of a family that owned a huge dairy farm, and learned that they planned to sell all of their property and then invest the money in chinchillas. At that time I was feeding chinchillas to some of my snakes because I could buy them for less than the cost of white rats, so I tried to tell the owners of the dairy the facts about the chinchilla business.

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Having done so to the best of my ability, and having seen that they did not believe me, I then said . . . “Look, I am not trying to sell you anything, I never saw you before today and will probably never see you again, all I am trying to do is save you from losing all of your money. At my own expense I will send a cable to President Eisenhower, together with the cost of his reply, and will ask him to tell you the facts about the chinchilla business. You can send the cable yourself, although I will give you the money to pay for it with; all I am asking you to do is to wait until you hear from him before you make a terrible mistake that will cost you everything you have.”

And how did they respond? They still did not believe me; and although I never saw them again I suspect that they did invest all of their money in chinchillas in spite of what I told them. And if so, I know what the result was: they never saw a cent of return on their investment.

Shortly after the chinchilla business came crashing down in this country, the same people tried the same thing using nutria; but in that case were far less successful; primarily, I believe, because this followed too closely after the chinchilla fiasco; they did not wait long enough to let a new crop of suckers grow up.

Nutria were introduced in this country from South America early in this century, escaped from pens on Avery Island, Louisiana, and then rapidly spread throughout Louisiana, Texas and Mississippi; by 1959 there were millions of them living in the wild and you could buy as many as you wanted for a dollar each since they were very easy to capture. We sold a lot of them to carnivals where they were exhibited as Giant Korean Trench Rats; they look like a common rat but are about ten times as big and have huge, orange-colored teeth. Later we bought them by the truckload, in 40,000 pound lots, and fed them to our alligators and crocodiles since they provided a good source of food for these reptiles at a low price.

Initially the Game Department in Louisiana was afraid that the nutria would damage the swamps, but later learned that they did no damage of any kind; and, eventually, their great numbers established a fairly large industry in the southern part of the state.

Huge Alligator Snapping Turtles, that sometimes weighed more than two hundred-pounds, were also sold by the truckload to large restaurants throughout Louisiana; and we sold quite a few of these to carnivals and reptile exhibits all over the country since they are very impressive, have huge heads and dangerous jaws. They feed upon fish and attract them by opening their mouths and displaying a small organ located inside their lower jaw that appears to a fish to be a worm; when the fish tries to get the worm, the turtle gets the fish.

In 1952, at a place called Bayou Black, near Houma, Louisiana, I met a woman named Annie Bonvillian who was rather famous throughout that part of the state as a snake woman. She supported herself, her crippled husband, and their children by catching snakes and turtles, and for a while she sold everything she captured to me. For a couple of years, after her husband died, she had an ongoing affair with Ray Olive, and made several trips with us. But, later, she accused me of selling her some sick monkeys and afterwards would have nothing more to do with me; her accusation was false, although she apparently believed it. She came into my office one day while I was on the phone and said that she was in a great hurry and wanted only to pick up a few monkeys; so I told her to pick out whatever she wanted, and she did, then paid me for them and left before I got off the phone. I never even saw the monkeys that she picked out herself, so if some of them were sick it was certainly not my fault; nevertheless, she blamed me.

Compared to our competitors, we had very few animals that died, because we always went to great lengths in our attempts to feed and care for them properly; we might lose two percent of the monkeys that we imported while our competitors were losing eighty or ninety percent of the ones that they imported; lost them primarily because they did not feed them properly. But we did lose some in spite of our efforts, and if a monkey died shortly after you sold it to a customer they usually accused you of having knowingly sold them a sick monkey.

In other chapters I have made rather brief mention of quite a few interesting people that I was involved with at one time or another, but the ones mentioned are but a few from the many such people that I have known quite well. In addition to those mentioned, I also had a lot to do with both Don Shula and Eugene ‘Mercury’ Morris, of the Miami Dolphins, Alvin Roy of the New Orleans Saints, Colonel James Anderson, Major Al Ruhschatz and Captain Jim Peterson of West Point, as well as a number of other officers there; doctors Fred Jackson, Fred Allman, and literally

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thousands of other doctors; Clyde Arnspieger, Jim Boy, Hank Warton, Bob Peery, all of whom were pilots; Shorty Turner, Alvin Crochet, Hugh Davis, George Short, Frank White, Manuel King, Frank Weed, S. E. Evans, Helen Yeld, Johnny J. Jones, all of whom were involved in the animal business; Vic Tanny, Boyer Coe, Bill Pearl, John Grimek, John Terpak, Mike Mentzer, Tom Laputka, Gary Reinl and thousands of others involved in exercise; Ben Sorenson, Donna Gosney, Lloyd Haber, Harold 'Bat' Gilbert, Tad and Bud Belcher, Frances Langston, Nick Orlando, Bob Glenn, Dan Vaughan, Susan Grayling, Houston Perry, Bill Garrett, Walt Marcyan, Zingy Harrison, and many, many others; as a child in Oklahoma, I met and talked to a famous outlaw, Pretty Boy Floyd, shortly before he was killed by the FBI, and later I met a famous boxer, Jack Johnson.

Even brief mention of some of my experiences with all of these people, and many others, would require a book of about 10,000 pages, but I remember all of them and believe that most of them will never forget me since our relationships were always interesting, to say the least. I never met all of the people who were involved in any of the businesses in which I was involved, but did get to know most of the important people in all of these fields. Many of these people, having read this, will probably be glad that I did not mention them; if so, they should not relax just yet, because I might get around to writing a later book in which they may be mentioned.

Many of these people are now dead, some are in jail, others remain close friends and a few are bitter enemies; but all of them, if they are honest about it, would have to admit that I always did exactly what I said I would do; the problems that I had with many of these people were not created by me, although I usually had to pay the price demanded by these problems.