

And God Laughs...

The Arthur Jones Autobiography

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“Pussy is pussy if it’s on a cow, but I personally prefer sheep.”

Gene Coppedge

Two brothers, Bill and Lester Piper, made a lot of money bootlegging in the 1920s, importing illegal liquor from Canada during prohibition, the same way that Joe Kennedy made his initial fortune; then the Piper brothers moved to a small town in southern Florida, Bonita Springs, and opened an animal exhibit that they called the Everglades Wonder Gardens. At one time they had the largest collection of crocodiles in the world and hundreds of large alligators, as well as many other animals, birds and reptiles.

When people gave them a sick cow to feed to their alligators and crocs they would usually try to save the cow, and in that direction started buying up land in order to have a place to keep the cows; they eventually owned several thousand acres of land that they paid almost nothing for. Then, in the late 1950s, the value of their land increased enormously; land they bought for \$1.00 an acre became worth several thousand dollars an acre, so they suddenly became multi-millionaires. Never having paid a cent of income tax or even filed a tax return in their lives. Even long after they became very rich they still dressed in rags, wore long shaggy beards, worked at least sixteen hours a day, seven days a week and lived out their lives in small wooden shacks, seldom spending anything on themselves.

In the mid 1950s somebody wrote three long articles about them that were published in the Saturday Evening Post; among other things one article mentioned that they had never paid taxes. When I visited him in 1957 Bill Piper asked me . . . “When did they pass them there income tax laws?”

On a hunting trip in the Everglades with a friend, the two men got into an argument over a dog and the other man shot Bill in the throat with a shotgun and left him for dead; but Bill survived, and when his brother visited him in the hospital and told him that he was going to kill the other man, Bill wrote his brother a note that said . . . “No, Lester, let it go; if you kill him we will probably end up in a feud that may wipe out both families.”

Near the end of Bill’s life the brothers had a falling out over something and never spoke to one another again. Bill’s wife went insane and died in a mental institution, but Lester’s wife is still alive as far as I know; was always very polite and courteous with me. Lester was almost stone deaf so was somewhat hard to communicate with.

Bill was one of the best outdoorsmen I ever knew and I tried to get him to go to the Caprivi strip with me to catch crocodiles; wanted his help primarily because he was a very experienced day hunter, caught crocs by digging them out of their caves; I was a night hunter and had no experience hunting crocs during the day. After that trip, when I showed Bill films of my experiences in Africa he told me that he wished he had gone with me. Sam Mutrux, the alligator poacher from Texas, was also a day hunter and I asked him to go with me but he refused also.

Which probably did not matter in the end because we caught every single big croc in the twelve-mile lake that we were hunting in, a total of 189 big crocs.

Bill hunted big crocs in Central America with Ross Allen sometime in the 1930s but they had a disagreement over that trip and never spoke afterwards; Bill was always very friendly towards me but apparently held a grudge forever. Very shortly before he died Lester visited me in order to buy some crocodiles from me and got a chance to see the huge croc that I got from George Craig, and was very impressed by it.

At one time they had a square enclosure that was about 100 feet on each side and that was literally stuffed with large alligators, hundreds of them; they were stacked on top of one another all over the pen. All of them were very heavy bodied and that pen provided a spectacular sight; in 1975 an article about me in the magazine Sports Illustrated had a picture of me sitting on top of a big alligator in that pen, but by then the numbers had been greatly reduced.

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Many of their animals were used in feature films, including the bear used in the film *The Yearling*. For a long time they would not keep any exotic animals, exhibited only animals, birds and reptiles native to Florida; but later added some Latin American types of wildlife.

Sometime in the 1930s a man named George K. End started canning and selling rattlesnake meat for restaurants; his place was located near one end of the Gandy bridge across Tampa Bay and was in a village called Rattlesnake, Florida. Near the end of the war he was bitten by an enormous rattlesnake and died; I saw the snake that killed him, even tried to buy it from him a few weeks before it bit him, and it had an unusually large head, the largest I ever saw. Ross Allen then took over his snake-meat canning operation but it never amounted to much.

One of the most unusual men in the snake business in that area was a man named Ray Singleton, who could easily have been the prototype for the expression 'a real character.' He changed his clothes about four times a year, never wore laces in his shoes, seldom shaved and probably never bathed; we called him 'The Inside Man at the Skunk Works,' because he bought and sold skunks by the hundreds, and because you could smell him at least a block away. He was nearly blind but handled rattlesnakes with his bare hands and refused to wear glasses. His house was stuffed with a wide variety of animals and reptiles, so full of cages and boxes that there was very little room left to walk through the house.

He was also the most infamous arsonist in the state's history; had started forest fires all over the state in an attempt to catch rattlesnakes; snakes in Florida hide from the flames of a woods fire by going down into the deep but rather narrow caves dug by gopher tortoises, and after a fire these holes are very easy to find so Ray could catch a lot more snakes by setting such fires. The authorities knew who was guilty of setting these fires, but never managed to catch him. So they made Ray a remarkable offer.

They offered to give Ray a new truck and two very expensive radios, one for his home and one for the truck; then told him that he would thereafter be the first person called on the radio when a woods fire broke out anywhere in the state. All they asked for in return was for Ray to stop setting fires; he already had, they told him, burned down nearly half the state.

But Ray told them . . . "No, I can't accept your offer; because you have accused me of setting some fires that I had nothing to do with; and that pissed me off."

Over a period of about fifty-five years, Ray probably handled more rattlesnakes than any other three men in Florida; he caught many himself but also bought a lot of them from other snake hunters. Until well up into the 1950s the number of snakes in Florida had to be seen to be believed, they were here in their tens of millions; but not now, and I believe that spraying chemicals in attempts to kill mosquitoes was largely responsible for the great reduction in the number of snakes and other forms of wildlife in Florida. Fifty years ago, Silver Springs was alive with millions of fish, but now there are very few left, a reduction of at least ninety-nine percent.

Ross Allen also bought large numbers of snakes and hired a man named Gene Coppedge to pick up snakes for him all over both Florida and Georgia. Ross paid Gene by the mile and I accused Gene of hiring somebody to drive his truck continuously around the block while he stopped to eat, in order to run up the mileage figures.

Gene was married simultaneously to two women, one full-blooded Seminole Indian named Mary Tiger and a white woman whose name I have now forgotten; neither woman was aware of the other, and either one would have killed him if they ever learned about his other wife. He was keeping both of these women in the rather small town of Slidell, Louisiana, while working for me and spent most of his time running back and forth from one woman to the other; telling both women that he had to leave them so much in order to go places for me.

Some policemen in southern Florida illegally caught several large alligators and arranged for Gene to haul them to Louisiana to sell them to me; but all of them arrived dead, so I refused to pay for them. But when Gene reported what happened to the policemen in Florida they did not believe him, thought he was trying to cheat them; so they took Gene out into a swamp and damned near beat him to death. Afterwards he was afraid to return to Florida and I never saw him again.

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On one trip to lower Mexico with me, Gene and I visited the only whorehouse in the area but there were only a few women there and all of them were old, fat and ugly; so we returned to the motel where we were staying about thirty miles away, and I went to sleep. But Gene did not; after I was asleep he went back to the whorehouse; because he apparently would fuck anything, told me once that he had fucked an alligator.

I would not have known about his return trip to the whorehouse except for the fact that when I awoke in the morning there was a large boa constrictor in a sack on the floor of our room, and it was not there before I went to sleep; then he tried to convince me that the snake had been there earlier, but I knew better than that.