

Alligator Hunting in Florida

NORTH FLORIDA

CATCHING ALLIGATORS by Kirk Monroe

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Although I had gone on many an alligator hunt, of which the object was the killing of these hideous saurians, either for their teeth and hides, or for the purpose of ridding some locality of a pest, I had never assisted in the capturing of one alive, nor had I until very recently any idea of how such captures were effected. Full-grown alligators of from eight to twelve feet in length are common enough in "zoos" and menageries, and in Florida nearly every curiosity shop is provided with a tank in which good-sized specimens are kept and exhibited as advertisements. In regard to these the majority of visitors who have given the subject any consideration whatever have vaguely imagined that they were captured when very young, and allowed to attain their present size in captivity. Some such impression that had lingered in my own mind was thoroughly dispelled one bright January morning as I walked along Bay Street in Jacksonville. Before the doors of one of the many curiosity shops something that excited the lively curiosity of a great crowd

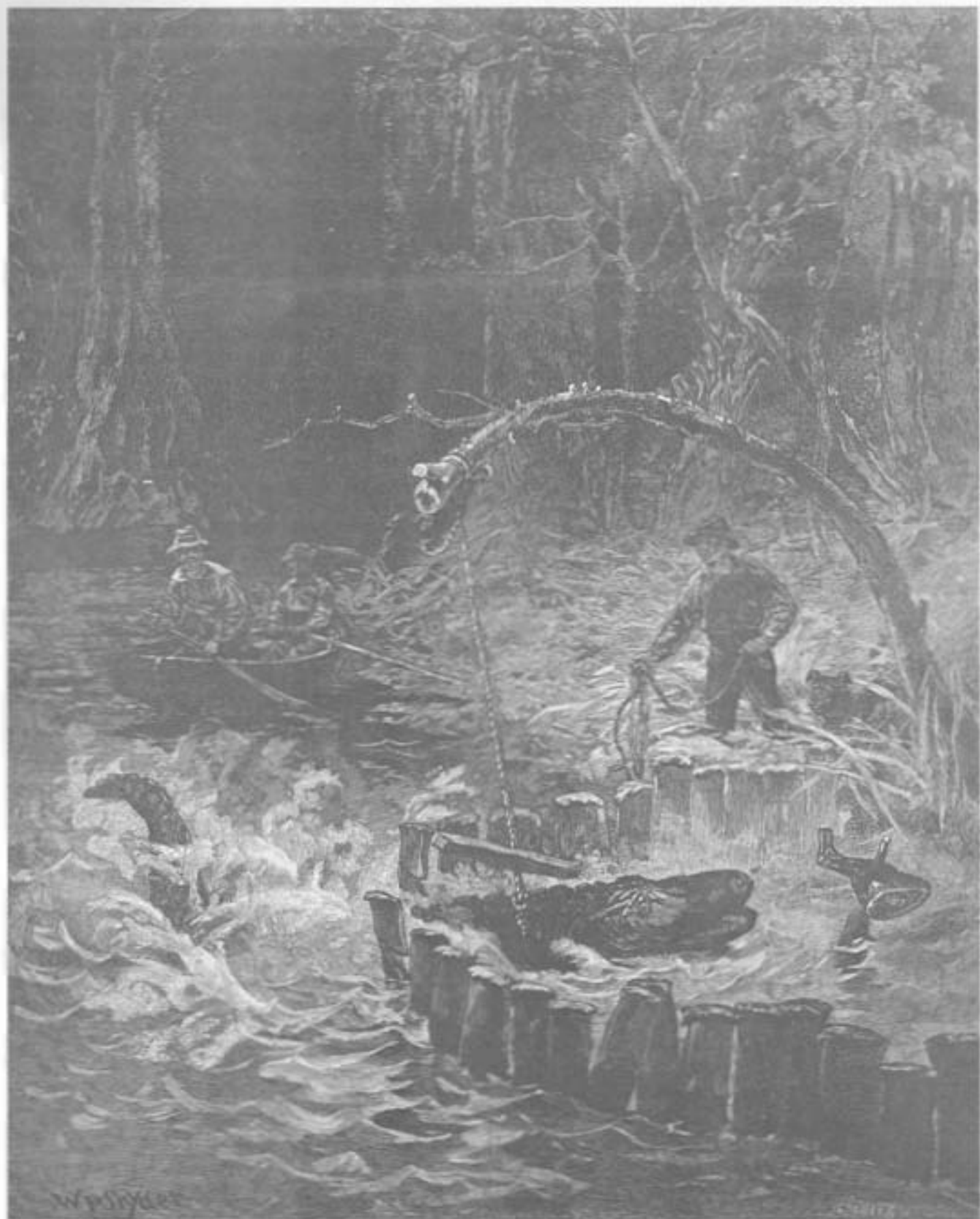
of people was being unloaded from a cart. The something proved to be an immense alligator, the largest, as I was afterward told, ever captured alive, measuring thirteen feet four inches from the end of his ugly snout to the tip of his tail, and weighing a trifle over eight hundred pounds.

He was so bound with ropes as to be perfectly helpless, and a gang of stout negroes lifted him from the cart, and carried him to the tank fitted for his reception at the rear of the shop, as they would a great log of wood. In this case the reptile had most evidently not been caught young and brought up by hand, for he bore many marks of a recent violent struggle, and a wiry little old man in torn and muddy clothes, who directed his transfer from cart to tank, was pointed out to me as the captor, and also as the most successful alligator-hunter in Florida. In personal appearance this man was so insignificant that it seemed impossible that any of the stories told of him could be true. He was nearly seventy years of age, so small and spare that his weight could not have been over a hundred and twenty pounds, and he had the sallow, colorless complexion peculiar to the "poor whites," or "crackers," of Florida. Although he had the reputation of being very taciturn upon all matters relating to his business, and the exploits which he regarded in a most matter-of-fact light, upon this occasion he was so elated over the

success of this his most notable capture that for once his tongue was loosed, and after the trophy of his skill was safely lodged in its tank, and the crowd had dispersed, I succeeded in drawing from him the following facts:

'Wa'al, mister, long's youm ain't in the business, nor likely to go into it on your own account, I don't mind telling yer how big 'gators is caught. Some fellers makes traps; like ez not you've seen 'em in some of the creeks puttin' in from the St. John's. They drives a ring of stout stakes in the water, clus to the bank, with an opening to one side. On the side nearest the bank they bends down a sapling with a noose to the end of it, an' jest inside the noose, in the water, they fixes a bait that'll spring the sapling when it's teched. That yanks the 'gator's head up in the yair, an' afore he can git clar they has him bound fast with ropes. That ain't my way, though. Hit's too much work a-fixing of the trap; you has ter wait too long a-watchin' fer the 'gators to come along an' stick ther snouts into it, an' then they'm too all-fired lively with ther tails, when ther heads is cotched, to suit me. Sometimes I fixes a noose on to the end of a spring sapling acrost a runway when it comes handy, an' I've cotched a right smart of 'em that ar way too; but I ginerally goes fer 'em in ther holes, an' digs 'em out.

"You know 'gators allus has



An Alligator Trap — drawn by W. P. Snyder

holes clus in under the bank. They begins in the water; but a leetle back they kinder raises, so's when he's in, he's half outen the water an' half in. Soon's cool weather comes on, 'long in December, theym gits into ther holes an' lies thar quiet like, 'cept on bright warm days, when they come out an' suns. A curus thing is that they allus goes in backwards an' lies with their noses p'intin' towards the opening. Wa'al, 'long in the fall I watches the 'gators putty clus, an' spots ther runways an' places whar they'm mos' likely to make holes; so by time cool weather sots in I has a dozen or twenty marked. Then when I wants a 'gator I goes fur him an' digs him out.

"How do I manage hit? Why hit's easy 'nuff when you knows how. I usen to take Mandy, my boy, along; but he's got big 'nuff now to go hunt-in' fer hissef, so I goes alone mos' ginerally. I cotched that thar feller all alone. Not a soul seed him twel I had him tied up an' ready fer market. When I had Mandy along he usen to punch a fence rail into ther hole, an' into ther 'gator's mouth. 'Gator'd grab it, an' hang on like death, an' never let up on his holt long's yer kep' movin' ther rail a leetle. While he was kep' busy an' amooosed like that ar way, I'd dig down into him, an' fust thing he'd know I'd hev a rope round his head an' fore-paws. Then I'd dig along back twel I'd git to his hind-paws an' git 'em tied up. But look out fer his tail! When he gits that ar loose, thar's gwine ter be fun, an' mud's gwine ter fly, you bet!

"Yes, sir, this yere feller give me a tussle. Mandy warn't along, an' I tackled him all alone. When I first jabbed the rail down his throat he begun to yank his head this side an' that, twel I 'lowed I was the tail-end of a threshin' machine. But I hung on, an' kep' a-proddin of him, kase I 'lowed he mought taken it into his head to come outen. When he begun fer to back, I begun fer to dig, an' 'cwarn't more than three hours afore I had him dug outen thar, and tied up snug as yer please.

"Yas, 'gators is mighty peart with ther tails; but they can't do nothin' much with their jaws. Them's their weak p'int. Why, sir, I kin cotch that thar 'gator by the end of his jaws with my han's, when hit's mouth's shet, an' hold hit shet spite of all he kin do; but keep outen the way of his tail, fer yer mought jes as well hev a cannon-ball strike yer.

"Does cotching 'gators pay? Wa'al, ef a man 'tends to business, he kin make livin' wages at hit. I got twenty-five dollars fer this yere feller, an' prices range 'cordin' to size — so much a foot ginerally — 'bout a dollar to a dollar and a half a foot, fer anything five foot long an' over.

"Little ones? Them I cotches by the hundred in scoop-nets, or digs 'em outen 'long with their mammy. They fatches 'bout a quarter apiece when trade's good. Mos' folkses hain't no idee how to care fer 'em when they gets 'em, an' bimeby they dies outen sheer starvation. You'm got to feed 'em like they was young kittens, and feed 'em in the water. They won't eat nothin' 'less they kin put their heads under water. Feed 'em on bits of raw meat, and put hit right clus to ther noses so's they kin smell hit. They can't find nothing' fer theirselves ef you throw

hit into the water.

"Skins an' teeth? No, ther hain't much doing in them now. Since you Yankee fellers has got to making celluloid teeth and imitation 'gator leather, prices is 'way down; 'bout thirty-five or forty cents is all the hunter gits fer prime hides, nothin' taken less than seven foot long nuther."

Before I left the old hunter he had agreed to send me word when he discovered another exceptionally large alligator, and promised to show me how to "jab" a fence rail down its throat in a manner that would induce him to "hang on an' keep him amooosed."

After keeping the big alligator in a tank for a week or so, and thereby attracting many customers to his shop, the curiosity man sold him to a travelling showman for seventy-five dollars, and Mr. 'Gator is now being exhibited to admiring crowds in the smaller towns of the Southern States.

The curiosity man wishes me to say that he will furnish good healthy alligators, sound in wind and limb, boxed for shipment to any part of the world, and of any size under ten feet long, for two dollars per lineal foot.

GATOR HIDE TRAFFIC

Two Thousand of the Skins
Shipped from Fort Lauderdale

Reprinted from THE MIAMI METROPOLIS,
August 15, 1904, page 1.

Few people probably are aware of the extent of the traffic in alligator hides in Savannah. A shipment of 2,000 hides of the scaly saurians was received yesterday by A. Erhlick & Bro. This firm handles on an average of between 15,000 and 20,000 'gator hides in a year, but a shipment so large as that just received is unusual says the *Savannah News*.

The hides come from the Florida Everglades, had been secured by the Seminole Indians, and were salt

cured and shipped in barrels. Here they will be sorted according to sizes and quality, thoroughly cured, and then exported to Europe, there to be made into various articles of ornament and utility. The shipment was made by Strachan [Stranahan] & Co., from Fort Lauderdale, an Indian trading post on the edge of the Everglades.

A representative of the firm, W.O. Berryhill, was in Savannah yesterday, and talked interestingly of the business of hunting the 'gator. "It

is done," he said, "almost entirely by the Indians, for though a few white men follow the business, the average Caucasian is incapable of living among the swamps and morasses where the Indians have their homes."

'Gators are hunted only during the spring and the summer, for though they are plentiful in the Everglades and the nearby streams the year round, in the winter the hunter devotes his time to securing the much more valuable otter. The pelt of that animal is then in prime condition and one of them is worth more than many 'gator hides.

"The Indian is a shiftless chap, as he is represented among the hunting Seminole," says Mr. Berryhill. About this season of the year, possibly a little earlier, he holds his Green Corn dance, which lasts about a week, and which means simply one prolonged merry-making. When this is ended he goes



Photograph of the 7½" souvenir plate that was painted for and sold by the Berryhill-Cromartie Company, Fort Lauderdale, 1910. Shown are the Andrews Avenue bridge and the company retail store, looking north from the south side of New River.



William O. Berryhill (1878-1954); Broward County Tax Collector 1915-1925 and 1933-1952. [Ivy Berryhill]

on a big hunt, and it is then that the majority of the 'gators are killed. It is then that the hides begin to come into the trading station. Mr. Berryhill says that he knows of as many as 1,500 to be brought in in one day.

The hunters are paid in cash, but they have little appreciation of its value, for none of them save [sic] anything. They simply spend it for a good time as long as it lasts, and as long as they have any [money] left they will not hunt or work. Then their pockets are empty, how-

ever, they go hunting again, and the alligator has a hard time of it until the hunter thinks he has enough to "lay off" and enjoy life for a spell.

Some of the Seminoles live near the outskirts of their boggy home, but the majority of them live in the interior. In many cases a family will pre-empt an island, clear it for planting, build a little hut of palmetto and establish his permanent home there. They are not conspicuous as farmers, their chief crops consisting of potatoes and pumpkins.