Alligator Hunting in Florida

NORTH FLORIDA

CATCHING ALLIGATORS
by Kirk Monroe

Reprinted from HARPER'S WEEKLY
April 12, 1884, pp. 223-4.

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 loosened, 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'ah, 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 touched. 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 caught, 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 caught a right smart of 'em that ar way too; but I generally goes fer 'em in ther holes, an' digz 'em out.

"You know 'gators allus has
An Alligator Trap — drawn by W. P. Snyder
holes clus in under the bank. They
begin in the water; but a leettle 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 that 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 'igators putty clus, an'
spots ther runways an' places what
they'm mos' likely to make holes; so
by time cool weather sots in I has a
dozin' 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 huntin'
for hissef, so I goes alone mos'
generally. I caught that ther feller
all alone. Not a soul seed him twel
I had him tied up an' ready fer market.
When I had Mandy along he uses 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 leettle. While
he was kep' busy an' amoosed 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, that'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
er to back, I begun fer to dig, an'
'warn't more than three hours afore
I had him dug outen thar, and tied
up snug as yer please.

"Yas, 'igators 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 catch
that ther '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 catchin' 'igators pay? Wa'al,
if 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 generally — 'bout a
dollar to a dollar and a half a foot,
fer anything five foot long an' over.

"Little ones? Them I catches by
the hundred in scoop-nets, or digs
'em outen long 'long with their mammy.
They fitches 'bout a quarter apiece
when trade's good. Mos' folkies
hain't no idee how to care fer 'em
when they gets 'em, an' bimeby they
dies outen sheer starvation. You'n
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 theirsefs 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 git's 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 amoosed."

After keeping the big alligator
in a tank for a week or so, and there-
by attracting many customers to his
shop, the curiosity man sold him to
a travelling showman for fifty-
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
tell you 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 ship-
ment 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 ship-
ment was made by Strachan [Stran-
ahan] & Co., from Fort Laud-
dale, an Indian trading post on the
edge of the Everglades.

A representative of the firm, W.O.
Berryhill, was in Savannah yester-
day, 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 merrymaking. When this is ended he goes 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, however, 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.