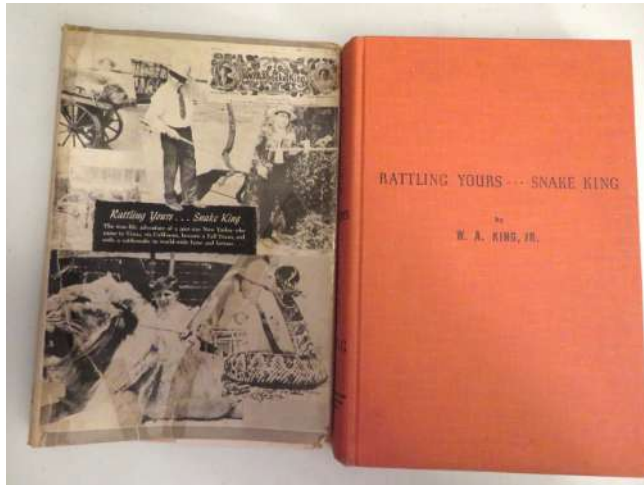


The Snake King of Brownsville

Rattling yours...Snake King by his son W. A. King Jr.

Book review and commentary by James “Drew” Bennie, Rio Grande Valley Chapter



I ran across this book at a garage sale and bought it having previously heard of the Snake King. I am glad I did because a recent search located only one for sale on the internet for \$500! That's because of its limited distribution, having been published in Brownsville by the son of the Snake King who wrote the memoir. All the editions advertised as sold were signed by the author, as is mine. They must have all been sold by him. I found it valuable in describing Brownsville from the 1910s to 1930s.

Memoir of the Snake King W. A. King written by his son, W. A. King Jr.

W. A. King was hired as a teen to care for the snakes in a circus side show and learned his business well. He realized that the snakes died due to lack of care so he decided to try to supply snakes to other circuses. He moved to Brownsville since it was mainly brush full of critters and had a railroad to ship out his animals. His business, Snakeville, was located across the Resaca from the old original graveyard in Brownsville, near where the zoo is now. The book describes the area around Palm Boulevard as “wild and woolly” until the boulevard went in which caused them to move a little further west. At first, the area around his place provided snakes to sell. He also sold armadillos, bobcats, javelina, occasional pumas and iguanas he bought. The book documents the many exploits of this entrepreneur among which were:

1. Riding a donkey to Austin to present the Governor with an invitation to the Brownsville Mid-Winter Fair that was branded onto a bobcat hide, wrapped in a large Rattlesnake hide tied with a bow.
2. When snakes became scarcer he contracted with authorities to supply Bobwhite Quail to restock parks in Texas and areas beyond that had been over hunted. Eventually, fear of disease stopped it.
3. Provided exotic animals to circuses and zoos. In the process, raised several tigers from cubs that were pets to his son Manuel and his dog. The King got the idea of starring his son as the world's youngest lion tamer and featured him and his border collie and the tigers in shows across the country. The tigers looked ferocious but no one knew they were totally tame to Manuel who grew up with them.
4. The time an order for “2 or 3” monkeys was misread and 203 were sent instead.

5. Brought a Hollywood film crew to film “Death on the Delta” in which wildlife from Snakeville would be provided during the filming at the Rabb plantation east of Brownsville. His son Manuel starred in it.

6. Cleared the area east of Brownsville known as Jackass Prairie of wild burros to feed his wild animals. He also purchased horses from the Calvary at Fort Brown that were being put down to feed his animals.

The hurricane of 1933 also was exciting at Snakeville with all of the dangerous animals there. The barn sheltering many animals was damaged and the lion escaped, killing a mule as the King and associates hid in another building fearful of being discovered by the lion. Some pythons also escaped but fortunately all animals were recovered after the storm before they scared too many others. The book claims that reporters telephoned King and asked if it was true, that a python ate a kid. King replied that it was true but that the kid was a baby goat. Sounds like the kind of tale I would expect from this guy!

No one would complain about a man ridding the area of dangerous snakes but the Snake King didn't just stop there. The list of species he collected and shipped out is lengthy and includes many species that are endangered or scarce today. His work no doubt added to this situation. The book talks of hundreds of horned toad skins curing before being stuffed and varnished for sale at novelty shops. Hand raised parrots made the best pets so thousands of baby parrots were bought and sold from Mexico for years. He says “I have seen thousands of baby parrots toddling aimlessly around the floor.” Other birds from Mexico were also caught and provided to the pet market. The Snake King reached to Central America for other animals such as coatimundis, tapirs, whiteface ringtail monkeys, and golden spider monkeys to name a few. He figured out how to trap Quetzals from Guatemala and imported hundreds of them the book reports. These birds do not live well in captivity and are now scarce in their home territory.

This book was worth reading for the local historic information. However, it also illustrates the western mind set of the early 1900s and before. Namely, that nature was there for everyone to exploit and that the abundance would never end. Now we are seeing the results of this kind of thinking. Living for today and not considering tomorrow has painted us into a climate change corner we will have a difficulty getting out of. This book illustrates this process of extinction here in Cameron County and beyond.