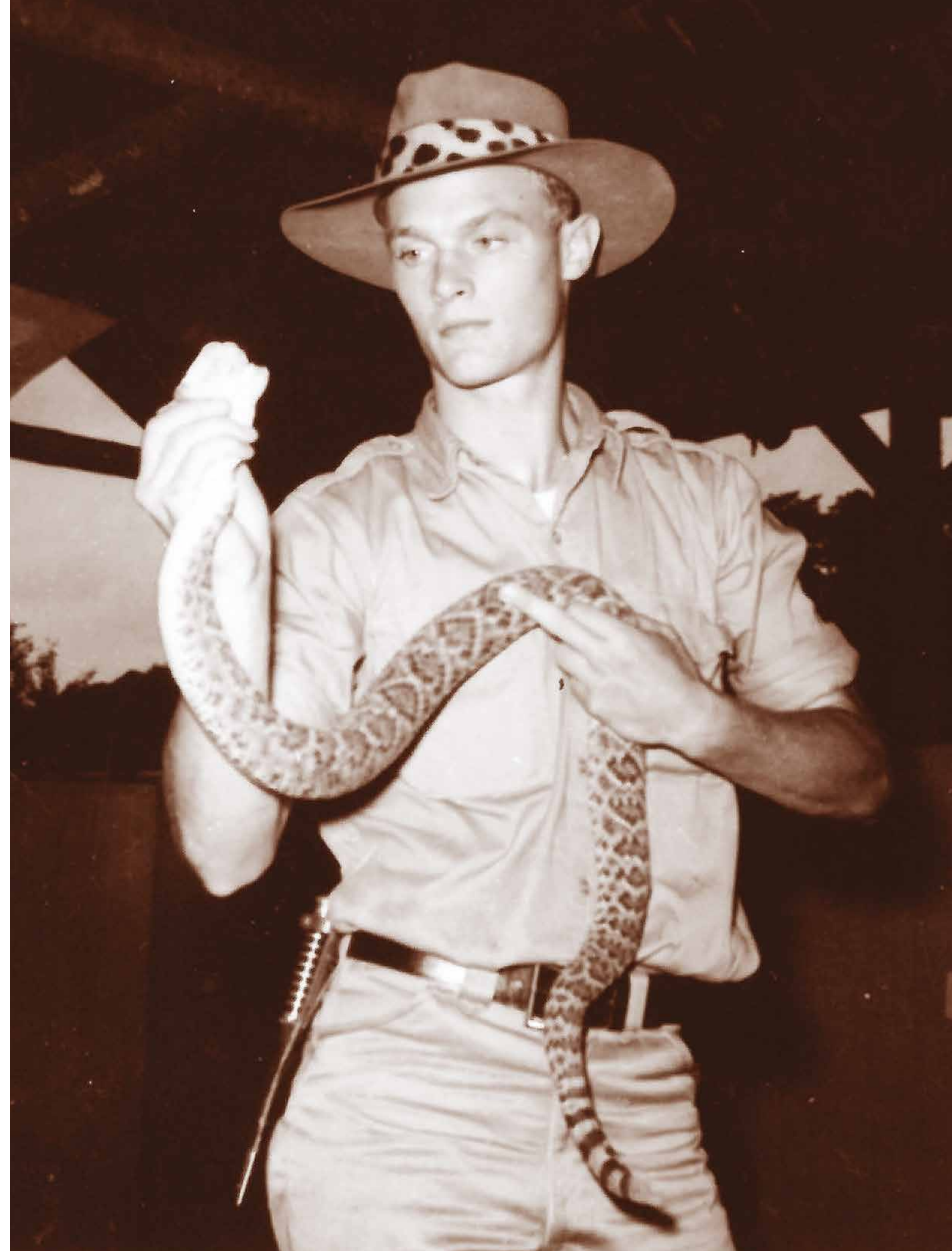


THE SCALIEST,  
MOST VENOMOUS  
ATTRACTION  
IN THE PARK

BY SALLY SVENSON

Photographs courtesy of William Brown



**“NOT JUST A DISPLAY...**

**BUT THRILLING SHOWS** where LIVE REPTILES are HANDLED BY PROFESSIONAL HUNTERS. BRING YOUR CAMERA. YOU’LL WANT PICTURES.” How could a tourist driving busy Route 9 through the town of North Hudson escape the siren call of the New York Serpentarium? Opened in 1956 during a boom in Adirondack attractions, and marketing itself as “between Frontier Town and North Pole,” this small seasonal reptile zoo was well-positioned to capture attention.

William “Bill” Brown, a college student from Downingtown, Pennsylvania, was a guide at the Serpentarium for four summers, from 1960 through 1963. He and his lifelong friend William “Bill” Birkhead—who shared his fascination with snakes and turtles—got Serpentarium jobs through an advertisement placed by its 41-year-old owner, James “Bo” Miller, in a newsletter from the Philadelphia Herpetological Society.

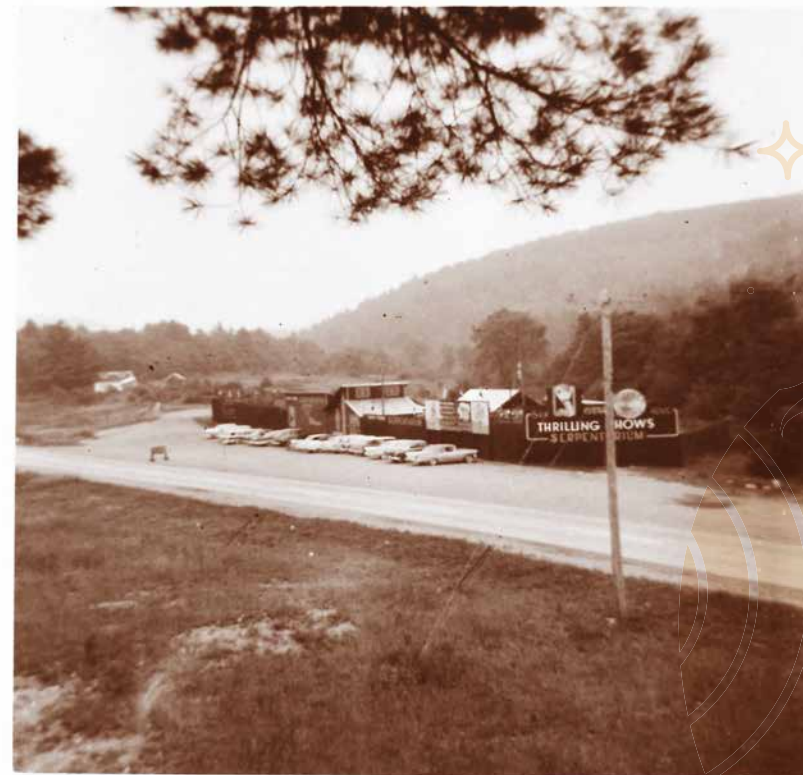
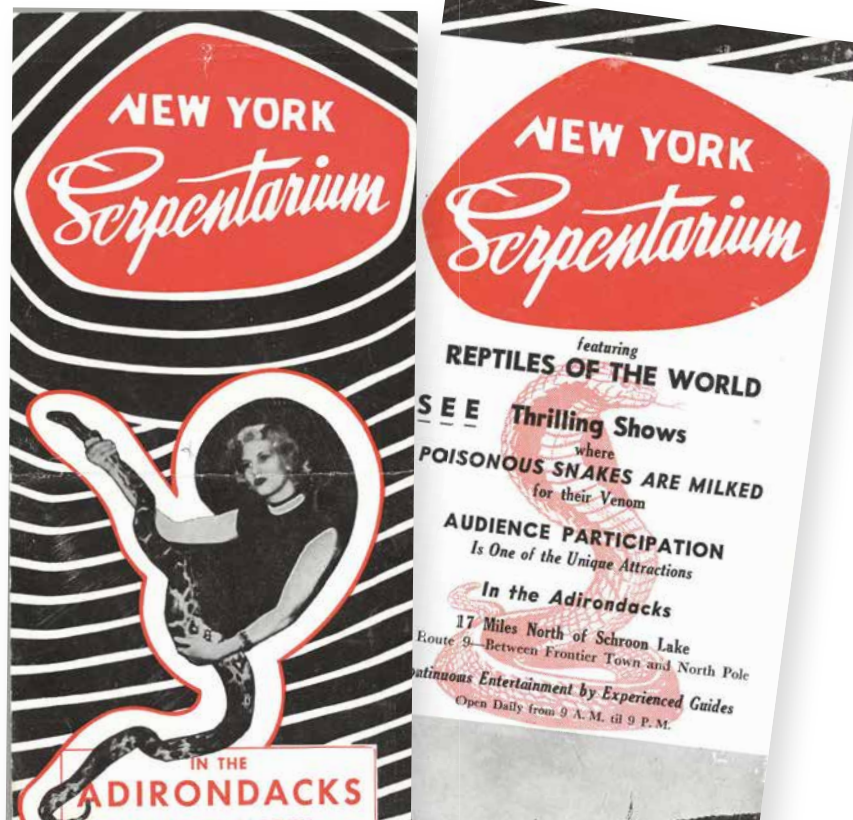
An enterprising Texan, Bo Miller had a colorful history. His mother came from a circus family, and he, educated through the eighth grade, began work in construction on the Mansfield Dam near Austin. He spent some time in jail for a youthful role in a bank robbery, but atoned for it by serving during World War II as a US Army pilot in the decorated 33rd Bomb Squadron. After the war, he and two brothers turned their attention to popular entertainment in the underground

circus tradition. This entailed running portable “grift zoos” or “ding joints,” roadside set-ups of trailer-transported modular panels with signs painted on them offering free shows: “See Monkeys,” “See Alligators.” Behind the panels and the featured attractions would be a portable tent in which prospective customers—“marks”—were offered the chance to gamble and were usually fleeced. Before long, the three men turned to legitimate occupations involving wild animals. They opened roadside zoos in nascent resort towns outside Great Smoky Mountains National Park: Fort Weare Game Farm, in Tennessee, in 1950, and Soco Gardens Zoo, in North Carolina, in 1953. According to Miller’s son Jim (or “Jimbo”), the permanent establishments reflected the same circus mentality as the brothers’ earlier endeavors but were more secure and stable. Launching an outlet in the tourist-friendly Adirondacks was an extension of the Miller business into new territory.

Brown says “the Serp,” as it was familiarly called, was a family affair. Miller manned the admissions desk and collected the entry fee of 90 cents (later one dollar) per adult, 50 cents for children over four. His wife, Clara, oversaw the



The New York Serpentarium, in North Hudson, wowed crowds in the early 1960s with alligators, turtles and snakes from around the world—including a deadly king cobra. The “bumper-card boy,” bottom right, wired Serpentarium ads to cars in the parking lot during tours.



**AN ENTERPRISING TEXAN, BO MILLER HAD A COLORFUL HISTORY. HIS MOTHER CAME FROM A CIRCUS FAMILY, AND HE, EDUCATED THROUGH THE EIGHTH GRADE, GOT INVOLVED IN THE UNDERGROUND CIRCUS TRADITION AFTER SERVING IN WORLD WAR II.**



**THE HIGHLIGHT OF EACH TOUR WAS THE RATTLESNAKE MILKING PIT, WHERE THE GUIDES STROLLED AROUND IN SNAKE-PROOF BOOTS AMONG DOZENS OF WESTERN DIAMONDBACK RATTLESNAKES AND DEMONSTRATED HANDLING AND MILKING TECHNIQUES FOR EXTRACTING VENOM.**



Clara and Bo Miller, of Texas, ran the attraction as a family affair, with help from their sons and other relatives. Bill Brown, at left and on page 33, worked as a guide for four summers. The guides, he says, thought highly of their experience at the Serpentarium, and of its owners.

craft/souvenir shop and lunch counter. Two Miller sons, teenaged Jimbo and younger brother Mayburn, helped out. A relative held the essential position of “bumper-card boy,” wiring cards bearing the venue’s name to automobiles in the parking lot in an era when the number of an attraction’s cards visible on regional roadways was a marker of commercial success.

Three or four guides constituted the balance of staff. They lived in a bare-bones bunkhouse on site and were well-fed by Clara in the Millers’ seasonal home adjoining the Serp. Guides wore khaki uniforms, as was expected of the big-game hunters they were purported to be, and gave live-animal demonstrations throughout the day. “Step right this way folks, a brand-new show’s just starting,” Brown remembers Miller intoning. “You

won’t miss a thing!”

The interior of the Serp covered only an acre of the 35-acre property, much less than its considerable exterior signage and the long plank wall fronting the parking lot might lead one to expect. The open-air display area was simple: fenced enclosures, rough-cut wooden posts supporting metal roofs for rain protection, a reptile house with a dozen large, glass-fronted cages, and a roofed “milking pit” surrounded by a raised walkway. Tours moved visitors from the entry to the alligators to the turtles to the harmless snakes to the reptile house containing a variety of creatures from all over the world. Some, such as the African puff adder, the Indian Russell’s viper, and the Asiatic banded krait, were dangerously venomous. (The king cobra from Southeast Asia was so deadly that only Miller himself was allowed to attend to it.) The last stop, and highlight of each tour, was the rattlesnake milking pit, where the guides strolled in snake-proof boots among dozens of western diamondback rattlesnakes and demonstrated handling and milking techniques for extracting venom. Although snake venoms are sometimes used in medical research, venom collected under the non-sterile conditions at the Serp was not.

“Audience participation,” advertised in the Serp’s brochure, translated as physical proximity to the demonstrations, when fearless visitors might be invited to help handle harmless snakes: even a heavy, 15-foot-long, reticulated python that was exhibited on crowded weekends and holidays. Numerous tour participants reached out to touch the rattles of rattlesnakes handled by the guides in the milking pit.

Guides considered their 65 dollars a week plus room and board a satisfactory salary, Brown says, but considerable attention was given to the matter of tips. Not-so-subtle signs hanging above two water-filled pans at the tour’s milking-pit endpoint carried the message: “Old Indian Legend: Drop Coin in Water, Make a Wish, When Snake Drinks, Wish Comes True—Proceeds go to Guides.” Guides learned that if their presentations were laced with excitement and humor, the

dinging sounds of coins falling into the pans were loudest. Proceeds were cleaned out each morning and later divided, while the pans were re-seeded with quarters and 50-cent pieces (no small change). An unofficial requirement of the guides was to make occasional forays through the Serp’s entry area to report to Miller on some problem in the yard—a proven inducement to recalcitrant marks to pay their entrance fees and take the tour. As Brown recalls, he once walked through with a bleeding hand from an alligator bite, leading customers to stream toward the admissions desk.

Miller’s ownership of the Serp was short-lived. During the winter of 1963–64, the state exercised its right of eminent domain to acquire the land for the Forest Preserve. The New York Serpentarium closed, but Miller was unwilling to give up the Adirondack connection. Knowing that an anticipated north-to-south interstate highway would likely kill Route 9 businesses, he purchased a new site on Route 28 in Forestport. Although less traveled than Route 9, the road was a primary entry to the Adirondack Park from western New York and on a direct route to the popular Enchanted Forest theme park in Old Forge. Unfortunately, Miller’s sudden death from cancer in March 1964 stalled the project’s momentum, and the relocated attraction, briefly managed by a Miller brother-in-law, failed.

The guides who worked there thought highly of their experience at the Serpentarium, and of its owners. Brown remembers Bo Miller as a kind, courteous father-figure; an upright man as well as an astute businessman. Brown and Birkhead’s summers at the Serpentarium influenced their paths to academic careers in biology. Birkhead, who passed away recently, became a professor at Georgia’s Columbus State University, where he studied fishes, turtles and alligators. Brown became a professor at Skidmore College, in Saratoga Springs, and has devoted more than 40 years to the study of eastern timber rattlesnakes in the southeastern Adirondacks. He serves on New York State’s Timber Rattlesnake Recovery Team of the Department of Environmental Conservation. ▲