

The Great Alligator Caper

The mind of a teen aged boy is a strange and fearsome thing. Fueled by raging testosterone, unleavened by wisdom and woefully short on experience, it's no wonder that synaptic glitches sometimes occur leading to aberrant behavior. I'm sure that's what happened to me in 1959.

In January of that year, deep inside one of the darker crevices of my cerebellum, a surprising new thought was formed. It was, I felt, a divine inspiration, a gift from God. It was brilliant! I immediately walked down the street to Gary Radford's house. Friends since the third grade, Gary and I had been co-conspirators in several adolescent schemes, and now I had a new one. A good one. I knew he'd want to hear about it.

"Gary," I said, "what do you think about going out to the zoo, stealing an alligator and turning it loose in the front hall at school?"

"Yes!," he said, "Let's do it!" He frowned a little. "Do you think we can do it?"

"Sure," I replied. "It'll be easy."

Gary was always a "take action" sort of guy, full of nervous energy and oblivious to potential obstacles. He became the driving force behind the idea. We were a team. Sort of like Dean Martin and Jerry Lewis or maybe the Dumb and Dumber guys. We thought we'd drive out to the zoo, nab an alligator, take him to school and turn him loose. Might take, oh . . . two or three hours early one morning. Actually it took months.

There were seven or eight expeditions out to Mohawk. Each time there were three to six or seven guys. The players changed on each trip and no one is absolutely sure who did what or when. Given the age and intellect of the perpetrators, we're lucky to get anywhere near an accurate retelling.

Our first obstacle was the fact that the alligators were in their heated off-season housing which was not open to the public, or to 'gator-nappers. So we waited. About two months later, I watched, incredulous, as Channel Six news showed a clip of the alligators being returned to their outdoor pit. The phone rang. Gary shouted, "Turn on the TV! Turn on the TV!" I told him I was watching. "Can you believe it?" he shouted. It was, obviously, another sign from God that we were predestined to do the deed.

The next week we made our first furtive, middle-of-the-night expedition. We spent most of the evening driving around aimlessly, crawling through Pennington's five or six times, stopping once for fries, blackbottom pie and a Coke, more aimless driving, a couple of games of snooker at Joe's Place, then we headed out to Mohawk.

This was a basic reconnaissance mission. We located the alligator pit. It was about 40 feet in diameter and six feet deep, with a pond filling the back surrounded by large boulders in an attempt to mimic natural habitat. In front, there was a wrought iron fence less than three feet tall. Hopping the fence was no problem, but how were we going to get an alligator out? Following a spontaneous, high-intensity brainstorming session, we devised an excellent plan. Success was imminent. We could feel it in our bones.

The second trip, we took Gary's little brother, Ron. (Ron was actually "Hank" at the time, but since then he has become an internationally famous flamenco guitarist. The name "Hank" somehow didn't seem appropriate to his chosen career, so he began to call himself Ronald, which was, conveniently, his real name all the time. Check him out at www.ronaldradford.com). The plan was to lower Ron into the pit, then, after he'd grabbed an appropriately-sized 'gator, we'd pull them both up. (What are little brothers for, right?) Unfortunately the 'gators were uncooperative. None of them came within range, especially one that Ron and the gang could hoist. (I talked with Ron the other day and, despite the passage of 48 years, he vividly remembers this incident.)

On our third trip, Dave Key was what you might call a "Key" player. (sorry about that.) At this point we really didn't have a plan, but we'd become fond of Mohawk as a great place to watch the dawn of the day. Following an evening of the usual stupid and pointless activities (see above) we wound up at Charles Wilder's house. (Charles is not Charles anymore. He's Chas, pronounced Chaz. The Air Force did it to him) Chas' mother was out that evening but had given Chas permission to have some friends over, so we had the house to ourselves. We played penny-ante poker all night, or at least up until about three or four o'clock when we went to throw Chas' paper route. We rolled into Mohawk just as a glow appeared in the morning sky.

After making our way to the pit, we all jumped over the fence, then Dave, in an amazing display of manly-man bravado, testosterone, and more than a little stupidity, jumped into the pit! There were about a dozen 'gators roaming about and he walked over

to a large one, perhaps twelve feet long and several hundred pounds, kicked it in the side and said, "Shooo!" and, "Git!" The rest of us, standing gape-mouthed on the rim, were waaaaaaay impressed by this and we all jumped in.

It turned out that 'gator herding is an acquired skill and none of us had acquired it. The alligators bunched up with the smaller ones on the far side, then they slipped into the dark waters of the pond. Another fruitless safari without our trophy.

The next two, three or four trips were essentially a repeat of this one. The most exciting trip occurred one morning when, right after jumping into the pit, we heard the wail of police sirens. They were close and they were loud! We scrambled out of the pit and ran like crazy. One of the guys even lost a shoe. We were really hauling! By the time we got to the car, however, we realized that it wasn't the police, it was a pack of hungry hyenas wailing for their breakfast. The mood was broken, however, and no one felt like going back to the pit, so we just went home.

On the fateful day, Gary, Mike Lloyd and Jerry Hine came by my house around 5:00 but failed to wake me up. They returned a little before seven with Gary saying, "We got 'im, we got 'im!" They opened the trunk of Mike's car, and there he was. Jerry had climbed up on the rocks behind the pool and put a "snake stick" in the water (a broomstick with a metal eye and a rope loop at the end that Mike had made), then waited 'til a gator swam through it. When a six foot, one hundred pound gator swam into it, he pulled the loop tight and jerked him out of the water like a fish on a fishing pole. Jerry was a much stronger guy than most people realized!

I was amazed, and disappointed that I hadn't been there. Gary, Jerry and I rode to school together almost every day our senior year. After leaving my house we decided that we ought to feed the 'gator. Being good citizens and all that, we felt it might be dangerous to turn loose a hungry alligator. We went to Food Town, Tulsa's only 24 hour grocery at that time, and went in to buy some food. What do you feed an alligator? We didn't have a clue. We finally decided on a container of raw liver and bought it. Tuffy (that's the alligator's name we later found out) was scared to death and not interested in eating. Either that or he had an aversion to liver.

At the time we didn't realize how toxic an alligator and a pound of raw liver might be in the trunk of Mike's shiny, new 1959 Chevy. It stunk to high Heaven for weeks! But

the *real* problem for Mike was the fact that his Mom wouldn't let him drive it for a long time. His good buddy, Ronnie Wallace, finally convinced her to let him back behind the wheel.

We drove through the front oval about thirty minutes before school and showed our six foot, hundred pound trophy to a few people, then we left and drove around for about fifteen minutes. When we came back and pulled into the oval, there was a crowd of people all across the front of the school, waiting for us. Mike pulled up near the western front entrance. We jumped out, Gary grabbed Tuffy's front end, I grabbed the rear, we ran up the steps into the hall and set him free. The crowd made such an uproar that it didn't take the administration long to make an appearance.

Unfortunately, we left a small piece of rope tied around the 'gator's neck. Otto Endres, Dean of boys, grabbed it and dragged the poor little alligator into the teachers' lounge (where he managed to trash the furniture while waiting for the zoo to come and get him). I'm pretty sure the excitement would have lasted a lot longer if we had taken the rope off.

Later, I was called into Endres office and interviewed by him, Dr. Knight and a couple of others I don't remember. They had already talked with Radford, Hine and Lloyd and those three had taken all the responsibility for kidnapping Tuffy. Gary told me that they kept asking, "Whose idea was this?" but he never ratted me out. He was the only one who knew my role in the caper. The group in Endres office told me that I "shouldn't associate with boys like that," because they could corrupt me. Oh sure. I acted very contrite. I agreed with them. I was released.

Charges were filed against Radford, Lloyd and Hine, the three who actually removed our little friend from the zoo. When the charges were read in the courtroom with phrases like: "Mike Lloyd, Jerry Hine and Gary Radford did unlawfully, knowingly and stealthfully, while acting in concert with each the other take, steal, and carry away one live alligator, named Tuffy, with a value of not less than twenty dollars in good and legal US currency," the Judge was fighting to conceal a grin. He said he though this was just a boyhood prank that the boys were unlikely to repeat. They assured him he was right, and he dismissed the charges.

We had been told to "keep this quiet" by Endres, et. al., but two days later I painted large, smiling alligators on both doors of Gary's 1952 primer-gray Chevy pickup. I have a photo of this somewhere.

Of course, there was no way to keep it quiet. A story about it was printed in the Tulsa World, picked up by the Associated Press and subsequently published in papers across the nation, including the New York Times.

Thirty-some years later, when Otto Endres died, the headline of the article about him in the paper said: "Teacher Who Caught Alligator Dies." I visited with Endres' son and daughter last December and they told me that he actually enjoyed the notoriety about the incident and it was vividly remembered by all his family. They seemed happy to meet me.

This is probably not the whole story. I hope those of you reading this who were also on one of the trips will send in your additions and corrections. Out of all our faulty memories, we might come up with something more accurate. Or, at least, more entertaining.

I'm still convinced that God had a hand in this. Perhaps not so much in the instigation of it, but in protecting us. Given the benefit of a little maturity, (OK, a whole lot of maturity), I now realize how incredibly dangerous this was. We could easily have been killed or maimed. I keep imagining the Tulsa World Headline that might have been:

TEENAGERS MAULED TO DEATH IN ALLIGATOR PIT
Incredibly stupid stunt goes awry.