SNAKE DEN FOR THE FAIR.

More Than 2,000 Slimy Reptiles Will Be Exhibited at Chicago.

To Be Turned Loose in a Miniature Swamp and Forest There.

Donald Burns, a Famous Trainer, Collecting Every Known Species of Serpent —Snake Charmers.

[Written for THE HELENA INDEPENDENT.]

DONALD BURNS, AN ANIMAL trainer, who spent many years in the employ of P. T. Barnum, yesterday received a communication from the World's fair commissioners in relation to a den of snakes for the exposition. Mr. Burns has had considerable correspondence with the commissioners over his proposed exhibit of from two to a dozen or more reptiles of every form that inhabit all known regions of the earth. He was informed yesterday that suitable arrangements would be made for his great collection of snakes and he would be given all possible assistance in collecting every species of the reptilian race. He proposes to make this great den of snakes, which will be placed in the national history building, one of the most startlingly realistic exhibitions ever known. Already he has more than fifty different species in readiness for the fair, and his agents are at work all over the world in collecting serpents in their great variety of forms.

"Yes," said Mr. Burns, when I saw him yesterday at No. 114 Roosevelt street. "I have undertaken by the no means easy task of supplying every known species of snake to the World's fair. It will be the greatest collection ever known, and it will be made one of the most remarkable exhibitions of reptiles ever witnessed. My idea is not alone to have the great den of serpents in full view, but also to permit those who desire it to view the snakes at meal time. The multitude of unbelievers as to the power serpents possess of swallowing a prey, the diameter of whose body exceeds many fold that of their own, will, if they desire it, be enabled to witness this feat.

"Not long ago a naturalist came to New York with one of the most magnificent collections of serpents I ever saw, and I have had the the pleasure of witnessing a great many. It was this gentleman's intention to take this splendid collection of snakes through the country and give a lecture on them. But the people displayed no interest whatever, and this naturalist who had spent the best part of his life in securing his collection of reptiles and studying the serpents of the world, went broke. He was forced to sell the most rare and costly of his collection for enough money to keep the wolf from the door. Now, if he had gone to Europe his life work would have been appreciated and he would at once have been recognized as a true naturalist and a man of science. The fellows who spin hair-raising yarns about snakes in the museums and circuses make a living out of it, while the true artist, as the gentleman I referred to certainly was, is forced to poverty because he wanted to give the public genuine goods. Well, at any rate, I hope to be able to interest the thousands who will visit the World's fair by its exhibition of reptiles. Two or more species of every known reptile will be shown in a great den.

"But as all snakes do not agree, will it be advisable to have them all together?"

"Well, I have not as yet fully perfected the arrangements appertaining to the display of the reptiles in the natural history building. The idea that strikes me as most likely to be adopted is to have a great inclosure of very heavy glass in the center of the building. There would be a miniature lake and swamp trees, rocks and dry surface for the reptiles. Now, of course, we would only put snakes in the den that agreed. The king snake that is common to the western and middle states, where it is frequently confounded with the chicken snake, which it very much resembles, though its body is much slimmer, would have to be put in a separate case. This snake derives its name from the implacable hostility it manifests to all other reptiles. Nor are its attacks confined to the non-venomous, for I once saw a king snake pursue and kill a rattlesnake. It feeds on rats, mice, frogs and birds. Some say that it swallows the snakes that it kills. My idea is to let the public witness the reptiles at meal time especially. They can learn more in a few minutes by practical observation than they could by reading a whole room full of books on reptiles. Another species of snake which I now have, and which will not be placed with the happy family in the main den of reptiles at the fair, is the serpent-eating hamadryas.

Mr. Burns exhibited this species of snake which is closely allied to the cobra, being almost as deadly. He had just secured a pair of them for the fair. It is an olive hue on the back and a dull orange below. The female is a dirty brown with cross bands of white.

"The hamadryas," continued Mr. Burns, "is a very difficult snake to secure. It is peculiar in that its sole food seems to be reptiles, of which lizards and snakes, whether venomous or otherwise, constitute the principal part. It is industrious and courageous in pursuit of its prey. It erects its head very high, and with a dreadful hissing expands the hood, following every motion of its prey. At a favorable moment it launches upon and at the same time gives its victim a bite which produces almost instant death from poisoning. The swallowing next follows, after which the reptile is in a state of coma for a dozen or more hours. It does not make another meal for ten or twelve days. Its bite is said to be as fatal as the cobra, being sufficient to produce death in an elephant within two hours after biting. Like the cobra it is oviparous, and has for its enemies certain birds that destroy the eggs, and the ichneumon, which will not only eat the young, but does not hesitate to attack the largest snake. A fight between the ichneumon, generally called the mongoose, and the hamadryas affords a sight memorable for the cunning, wariness and celerity of action and ferocity displayed."

The hamadryas frequently attains a surprising growth, exceeding fifteen feet. The snake now in Mr. Burns' strong box is about eleven feet long. Mr. Burns also has in his fair collection two cobras. They arrived from the East Indies last week.

"This dreadful snake," said Mr. Burns, "has a large range over the East Indies, where it is everywhere regarded with the horror of a pestilence, a feeling most natural when we consider that not less than 5,000 persons annually perish from its bite in the Indian peninsula alone. The Hindus hold this reptile in reverence and resent any attempt at its destruction. In coloring this reptile differs materially, according to season and locality. Most frequently it is of a deep olive on the back, white below, with hooded neck on which appears markings somewhat resembling eyeglasses, except that the bow is longer. But again it may be brown, with black eyeglasses; or the body may be deep brown with no eyeglasses at all, or only a couple of white spots on the neck; again the reptile appears with black body with a single white spot on the neck. Numerous and variable as the markings are they belong to a single species. As the collection of snakes I am gathering for the fair is intended to be complete in every respect, I will have the hooded snake in its various colorings. The most peculiar thing about the hooded snake, or cobra di capello, is the curious dilatable neck, which it spreads on the slightest irritation. This power is afforded by means of elongated ribs, which may be thrown out or depressed at will. When expanded the neck is several times the width of the head, by which a covered hood is formed, on the back of which is the singular decoration called eyeglass marks. The superstitious Buddhists regard this marking as the imprint of Buddha, and explain it by declaring that when Buddha became weary with the work of creation he sought repose under the shade of a tree, but the sun moving while he thus slept poured its rays into his face. A cobra, perceiving the exposure of the philosopher spread its hood and remained bent over him, thus shading his face until his sleep was finished. Upon waking Buddha perceived what kind office the serpent had rendered him and thereupon promised to repay the cobra with a like kindness. This promise he soon forgot, but was reminded of it under peculiar circumstances. Years afterward a great bird hovering over the earth began devouring the cobras until the species became well nigh extinct. Thereupon, in a spirit of despair, the cobra that had shielded Buddha besought him, and referring to his promise, petitioned the god to give protection to his species, which Buddha did by placing the markings upon the cobra's head, thereby frightening the great bird and preventing its further attacks. The natives, therefore, regard the reptile that once received the favor of the founder of their religion as too sacred for molestation, although its bite is so venomous that none ever recovers from it.

"It is also my intention to have Hindus at the fair," continued Mr. Burns. "What more interesting exhibition could there be than a couple of Hindus sitting outside their huts, which will be reproduced true to nature, charming cobras with music, and men and women snake charmers will be secured, and the thousands of visitors will be convinced of the truth of the stories of snake-charming by music.

It is a strange fact, not less difficult to understand than the accepted science of mesmerism, that music exerts a fascinating power over many creatures, and sensibly and powerfully on the cobra. Sometimes, it is true, the fangs of these performing reptiles are drawn, but not always, nor by any save the counterfeiters and fakirs. Those who have studied the habits and disposition of this snake are able to handle it with impunity, and seemingly to make it dance to their pipings. Thus may be seen in every part of India Hindus going about from place to place with baskets filled with cobras. Whenever an audience seems promising the baskets are deposited, music of fife, tambour and drum starts up, at which the snakes crawl forth at their own volition, and go writhing among the charmers. I want to reproduce this very interesting exhibition true to life at the fair."

"How many snakes will be seen at the fair?"

"Well, in round numbers, about 2,000. Of course, there are not that number of different species, but I will have them of all sizes, shapes and colors. Reptiles are classed by naturalists as ophidia, a Greek word, meaning serpent, and under this head follows the numerous species which have been divided by Lacepede into eight genera, each of which are again subdivided into several classes. The eight genera comprise the boa, which contains eleven species; the vipers, of which there are 196 species; rattlesnakes, with twenty-six species; snakes under which the harmless reptiles are classed, twenty-four species; the anghis bohens, a double-headed, five species; langrata, one; coecila, two; and asraboid, one. The collecting of the various species will occupy my time till the time the fair opens."

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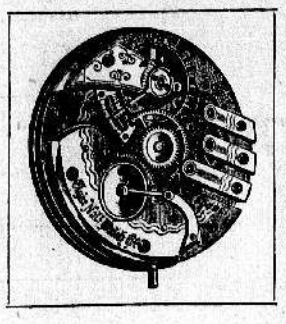

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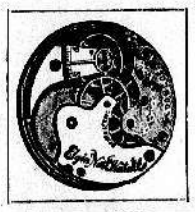

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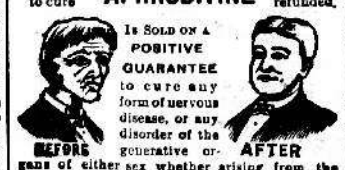

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