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AN ALLIGATOR HUNTER IN THE MAKING

By A. W. DIMOCK
Photographs by JULIAN A. DIMOCK

As a candle to a moth, so is a jack-lantern to an alligator. It irresistibly beckons him to his destruction.

GIMME a gun, quick, I seen a 'gator!' cried Buddy, as he tumbled down the companionway. I nodded toward the rifle which hung over my bunk, and called out, "Magazine's full" to the boy who was leaving the cabin on the jump.

"I know it," he replied, though how he knew it I don't understand to this day.

Buddy was a little Florida cracker, twelve years old, and a great chum of mine. He was quite at home on my boat, and made me the confidant of his aspirations and ambitions. He was an alligator hunter by inheritance, and dreamed of the day when he could go out on the trail by himself. No Indian youth was ever more anxious to be reckoned a warrior than was this barefooted boy to be called a 'gator hunter.

I hurried on deck, but already Buddy was in a skiff sculling vigorously across the river. When near the opposite bank he took in his oar and sat down on the thwart with the rifle on his knees. For a quarter of an hour the skiff floated slowly toward the bay, then the boy slowly lifted the rifle to his shoulder, and after half a minute of careful aiming and waiting for the best chance, he fired. There was a cascade of water where the bullet struck after passing through the brain of the reptile, and the upturned yellow belly of the boy's first alligator showed for a moment on the surface of the water. Buddy dragged the carcass, which was nearly twice his own weight, into the canoe, carried it ashore and skinned it with the skill of an old hunter. When, an hour later, he brought back the rifle, cleaned and oiled, he carried in his pocket three silver quarters and wore on his face a new expression of great dignity. He had killed a 'gator.

Buddy now was wild to go on a real hunt and got the promise of "Uncle Charley" to take him if his father would let him go. Uncle Charley was a hunter and a cosmopolite. I had met him guiding in the Wind River Valley, and had camped beside him on a Rocky Mountain divide more than a score.
of years before. Buddy coaxed me to help him, and I persuaded his father to consent to his going, by promising to go with him and look after him.

We stowed away in our 17-foot skiff such necessaries as rifle, axe, bull’s-eye lantern, salt, and a five gallon can of water. We added some non-essentials in the way of grub and a few, a mighty few, dishes. Our clothing consisted of shirt, shoes, trousers, hat, and belt. To these I added the luxury of two changes of underclothing and stockings, also a small roll containing tooth brush, towel, etc. Uncle Charley suggested that if I would take along a shot gun it would ease up on the grub pile.

On the first day of the trip we made twenty miles. In the afternoon an alligator slid from the bank into a creek which we were passing, and Charley suggested that we camp on the first dry spot we could find and come back for the gator in the night.

As soon as it was dark we started out in the skiff on the fire-hunt. Buddy with a bull’s-eye lantern bound to his forehead for the first time, knelt proudly in the bow with the rifle in his hands. Charley sculled, while I sat amidships hugging the smudge-pot, for the mosquitoes were fiendish. We moved slowly down the stream, while the tiny searchlight played over its surface and along its banks. Excepting a few, low-voiced suggestions which Charley made to the boy, there was no sound from the skiff. But our progress was far from silent. For the light that fascinated the alligator frightened fish and birds, and while the latter flew from the trees beside us the leaping fish sometimes struck our craze. The motion of the skiff was checked. Slowly it was turned toward the opposite bank and I noticed that the beam of light had ceased to play over the surface and was resting steadily beneath the branches of a mangrove tree that grew on the border of the river. I could see no sign of a gator, but Charley and the boy did, and the boat moved steadily until, when half across the stream, I caught the dull red reflections from the eyes of an alligator as he faced us, and soon the outlines of the head were clear. As the boy was raising his rifle a whispered “no” from behind me, stopped him and we continued to advance. Neater and nearer we came to the creature and again the weapon was lifted—this time no whisper restrained the boy—and the crack of the rifle was like the roar of a cannon in my ears.

“Look out!” came sharply from Uncle Charley, as he feared the boy was about to seize the wounded reptile, which was thrashing about beside the skiff. But Buddy was a gator hunter a generation before he was born, and he waited coolly until the mouth of the brute was closed. Then seizing it by the nose, he dragged its head over the gunwale and held the reptile’s jaws together until the hunter had severed its spine with an axe.

As I groped my way to bed that night I slumped down to my knees in a mud hole and crawled under the bar in a slimy condition that would have done credit to any reptile in the country. A lot of mosquitoes got into the net with me, the bushes under me were constructed chiefly of knots and bumps, while things crawled over me all through the miserable night. I was wakened by the smell of coffee the next morning, and greeted by Uncle Charley as I crept from under the bar with the question; “Did you sleep well?”

“Bully,” I replied.

It seemed unnecessary to explain that in my vocabulary
"billy" meant tough. By the time I had taken the swim my condition demanded, Buddy had skinned the alligator, salted and rolled up its hide, and breakfast was waiting.

We rowed all the forenoon, and as the water grew shoaler in the afternoon, poled and dragged the skiff until, when we tied up at night, on the border of a partly submerged meadow, all hands were ready for supper and bed. Grits and gravy began to lose their attractiveness, and I told Charley that I'd take his rifle and shoot some ducks the next day.

I happened to be thirsty after supper, and was horrified to find the water can empty. Charley laughed as he told me that he had saved enough in the coffee pot for breakfast, and that we would find fresh water on the prairie the next day.

I took twice my share of coffee at breakfast and put molasses instead of grease on my grits, but resolved that there would be fresh meat for supper if I had to shoot a crow to get it.

"Better fix to camp out," suggested Charley, as we were getting ready to start and I rolled up my mosquito bar, picked up the rifle, and stuffed a handful of cartridges into my pocket.

"There's going to be something doing if there's any game in this country," I observed to nobody in particular.

"I s'pose it's agin the law to shoot a buck," Charley soliloquized. I told him the story of a boy who once proposed to carry my camera to the unexplored top of Mount Eolus, in far away Colorado, on the following day.

"But to-morrow will be Sunday," I said to the boy.

"Ain't no Sunday above timber line," he replied.

Uncle Charley's comment on the story was a fervent wish, sulphurously expressed, that we were all on top of Mount Eolus that blessed minute.

We tramped all the forenoon over meadows dry, ankle deep in water, or knee deep in mud, and among little islands of trees. About noon Buddy, who was walking a few feet in advance of me, called out excitedly:

"Look! Look! See that deer."

I looked where he pointed and saw a fawn, standing among some bushes within a hundred yards of me. I watched the pretty creature until it disappeared, and then said, in reply to a reproachful look from Charley:

"I don't shoot babies. If it had happened to be a buck—"

but a man is not obliged to testify against himself.

"I know all about that, but we're hungry," muttered Charley.

A few minutes later I shot a fat limpkin which looked down upon us from a tree in a little "head" of cypress, awoke to the knowledge of a far greater plague—the microscopic redbug, which even the Indians dread. There were a dozen little inflamed areas on my flesh that itched microscopically, which I hardly needed, so scarce were the insects; but I put on my grits, and within half an hour the reptile showed up again and the bullet from the boy's rifle lifted off the top of its skull. Buddy waded into the pool waist deep for his victim, and in thirty minutes we resumed our march with a freshly salted, tightly rolled alligator hide added to the hunters' burden.

In the afternoon Buddy found a little five foot "gator on the prairie in water that was so shallow that he could not hide and his skin was soon on the back of the boy. From the tail of the creature I cut a steak of white flesh, delicate as the breast of a chicken, which was kept in salted water over night and broiled for our breakfast.

The boy and I feasted upon it, but Charley said:

"I pass; I've killed too many of the things, and don't eat 'em less'n I hafter."

I slept soundly on the grass underneath my mosquito bar, which I hardly needed, so scarce were the insects; but I happened to be thirsty after supper, and was horrified to find the water can empty.

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A few minutes later I shot a fat limpkin which looked down upon us from a tree in a little "head" of cypress, myrtle and bay. We found here a pool of drinkable water, and made our noon camp beside it after killing a pair of moccasins which had preempted it. We ate the "Indian hen," from its bill to its toes, and wished it had been twins.

Soon after resuming our tramp we came upon an alligator trail which Charley said was only a few hours old. It led to a shallow pond, the water of which was rolled and disturbed, telling us that the reptile had seen us. The boy took the rifle while Charley grunted in imitation of a young 'gator. Presently the eyes and nose of an alligator appeared on the surface for a few seconds, and then slowly sank from sight. Just as they disappeared, Buddy's bullet struck the water above them. The young hunter was much mortified, but the older one cheered him up, saying:

"He'll come up agin. If he don't I'll wade in and fetch him." Charley continued to grunt every few minutes, and within half an hour the reptile showed up again and the bullet from the boy's rifle lifted off the top of its skull. Buddy waded into the pool waist deep for his victim, and in thirty minutes we resumed our march with a freshly salted, tightly rolled alligator hide added to the hunters' burden.

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I slept soundly on the grass under my mosquito bar, which I hardly needed, so scarce were the insects; but I happen...
We found here an Indian canoe which Charley recognized as belonging to two hunters from near Boat Landing. While at supper we were joined by these hunters who brought back a load of alligator hides and half a deer. They turned over a quarter of venison to us, quite as a matter of course, and I was too hungry for it to indulge in any moral scruples, and quite ignored Charley's innocent query as he broiled a slice of it:

"Any objections to eatin' a piece, secin' somebody else killed it?"

The chance of getting into the real thing in alligator hunting was too good to be lost and before we slept it had been arranged that we join forces. Business began the next morning. Breakfast was at break of day, and before the sun was up we were ploughing through the dank, gloomy recesses of a dismal swamp, wading in water, wallowing in mud, walking slippery logs, and climbing over slimy stumps.

The three hunters carried cooking utensils, grub, salt, rifle, axe, iron rod, and hook. Buddy toted a rifle, while my load consisted of a mosquito bar tucked in my belt, and a compass fastened to it. The hunter's burdens were greater, but their route was shorter than mine, for they travelled straight ahead, while I tried to walk around the moccasins in the trail. Before the end of the tramp I was walking straight, so tired that I wouldn't have turned aside for a python.

The element of sport influenced our hunters for hides about as much as it affects workmen in an abattoir. There was no excitement when we struck the fresh trail of an alligator. It was followed a few hundred yards to where the reptile had taken refuge in a cave. One of the hunters thrust a thin iron rod through the soil until it struck the 'gator, which soon poked its head out of the cave, another caught his hook in the jaw of the reptile, while the third hunter smashed its skull with an axe. In a few minutes the hide had been stripped off, salted and added to the hunter's pack. As we resumed our march the first of a family of buzzards settled in a tree over the carcass.

When we camped for the night eight hides had been added to the packs carried by the hunters, and I wished the number had been eighteen, as I needed the handicap. The boys were considerate, and often asked if they were going too fast for me, to which I usually replied by offering to carry their packs, though I couldn't have kept up the bluff half a day without the rest that came to me from the time taken to skin the reptiles. The hunters stood back, from time to time, to give Buddy a chance at every part of the business, and made formal demands upon him to keep the camp commissary supplied. I rejoiced at the spirit shown by one of them who rebuked the boy sharply for proposing to kill another deer while yet we had half of one on hand.

It was just one week from the day we left the canoe, when the hunters laid down beside it their burden of hides. One of these hides had been carried by the boy, who, unassisted, with rod, hook, axe, and knife, had captured, killed and skinned the reptile who grew it.

As we parted with our recent partners the elder one tapped with his hunting knife the shoulder of the boy, and said to him:

"Good-bye, Kid, you can tell your folks you're a 'gator hunter."

It was the voice of authority. Buddy had received his accolade.