

Florida's Warren Frazee – “The Original ‘Alligator Joe’”

Jim Broton

The identity of “Alligator Joe” is confusing. Two men used that name for many years, and both spent part of their lives in Jacksonville, Florida. Not surprisingly, both worked with alligators. “Alligator Joe” Campbell is the best known of the two. But Warren Frazee marketed the name before him and is more deserving of that moniker. This article highlights the events of Frazee’s too-short life with the hope of restoring some of his past, mostly-forgotten glory.

The confusion regarding Alligator Joe spread less than a month after Frazee’s death. A prominent national newspaper article began: “‘Alligator Joe’ is dead, and Joe Campbell reigns in his stead.”¹ It then gave a long, detailed description of the activities of alligator keeper Joseph Campbell. The article following Frazee’s death circulated throughout the country appearing in several major newspapers. The two men’s stories became forever muddled. But Warren Frazee’s accomplishments with alligators far exceeded Campbell’s, as Frazee was once regarded as the foremost expert on alligators and their behavior.²

Hubert Ian Campbell³ ran an alligator attraction in 1907 in Hot Springs, Arkansas.⁴ In 1916, he moved it to South Jacksonville, Florida.⁵ He said that he “trained” alligators to perform. For instance, they dropped down a slide into water. Campbell headed that tourist stop until his death in 1926.

To add to the confusion, Alligator Joe was also the name of an alligator, a local tourist attraction in Jacksonville. The saurian had arrived from Polk County in 1887 for the Sub-Tropical Exposition.⁶ The alligator

came to be called Alligator Joe (also Joe and Old Joe⁷). It was penned in Waterworks Park and died there in 1904.

Since his childhood, Warren Frazee had trapped, handled and tamed alligators and crocodiles.⁸ One can picture a pudgy 13-year-old boy, silently staring at Jacksonville's alligator, Alligator Joe. A farmer's son was about to make a life-changing decision. With boundless enthusiasm, he exclaimed: "Father, I wish to devote my life to studying these fantastic creatures, and I want everybody to see them!" "That's fine," his father replied, "so long as you can make money doing it. You have to eat." That may have been how Warren Frazee became Alligator Joe and started what would become his lifelong career.

Frazee's father, Randolph, was born in New Jersey; his mother, Anna B. Frazee, was a Florida native.⁹ They lived in South Jacksonville, Duval County, Florida. In the 1880 census, his father was a farmer and his mother kept house. By 1887, they lived in East Jacksonville at 224 Spring Street, and Randolph was a steamboat watchman.¹⁰ After 1892, he was a bartender. Warren was their second child, born on March 1, 1873.¹¹

As an adult, Warren Frazee left South Jacksonville, and established alligator farms in Palm Beach and Miami. He also ventured out with menageries of sub-tropical fauna to New Jersey, Boston, Kansas City, New York, Denver, Chicago and San Francisco. This was a remarkable feat for a Florida farmer's son, especially one born at that time. His adventures are described below.

The written history of Frazee as Alligator Joe, alligator hunter, begins in 1897. He lived with his parents then and is described as a boarder and a hunter.¹² It is not known what he did before that time, but there is one suggestion from someone who knew him.

In an interview in Thelma Peters' book *Lemon City: Pioneering on Biscayne Bay, 1850-1925*, Jerome Sands calls Frazee "the first of the professional alligator wrestlers. Joe lived with the 'gators out in the glades but every Saturday afternoon he came to town. He was a college graduate—you couldn't stump him on a single

thing.”¹³ I have not found any evidence that contradicts those assessments.

By 1897, 24-year-old Alligator Joe Frazee was already both a skilled hunter and an entertaining showman. He made an “excellent living” by “chasing alligators” and displaying them in his alligator farm.¹⁴ He also raised them, and in 1898, Frazee gave a detailed, almost-scholarly account to a newspaper reporter of the egg-laying habits of the alligator and the crocodile.¹⁵

Frazee was also a businessman, shipping baby alligators and alligator hides throughout the country. In 1898, he gathered and sent 2,892 alligator eggs to northern markets.¹⁶ That year, he also shipped 600 alligator hides. In 1899, with Frazee acting as intermediary, several Seminole Indians sold 310 hides to the E. L. Brady & Co. grocery store in downtown Miami.¹⁷

Frazee gained notoriety in 1897, when he staged a fight between a crocodile and an alligator¹⁸ at Card Sound, near the southeast tip of the Florida peninsula. Hundreds of cheering and betting wreck salvagers viewed the spectacle, where Frazee's alligator won, ripping the crocodile to pieces. Frazee left the match at least \$200 richer.

Frazee first ran an alligator attraction on the island of Palm Beach, Florida. It was called “The Florida Alligator Farm” in 1900,¹⁹ and it was located about one mile south of Henry M. Flagler's mammoth Royal Poinciana Hotel.²⁰ The attraction began in the mid-1890s, soon after the hotel opened. Wicker wheelchair drivers took wealthy tourists to the attraction down Jungle Trail Road. Frazee gave twice-weekly performances, where he would “capture a ‘gator single-handed.” Visitors also viewed pens filled with many different-sized live crocodiles and alligators and could search the contents of a large chickee for souvenirs. During his performances, tourists were treated to several examples of Frazee's showmanship. All this was done while he displayed the Alligator Joe persona – that of “a half breed ... half Indian, half Mexican, and half cavalier” who spoke using “a comical imitation of the Indian accent.”²¹

One show began with a small alligator draped over Frazee's shoulders. He put it to sleep, turning it upside down and stroking its belly. He then said, "Now alligator sleep; me wake alligator up. Who wants to see me wake alligator up without touching alligator?" When everyone wanted Alligator Joe to wake up the "sleeping" saurian, he made a guttural click sound that aroused the alligator. "Now, gentlemen, don't you think that is worth a nickel apiece?" he said, then giving personal thanks for



Postcard of "Alligator Joe," the alligator in Jacksonville, Florida Courtesy of Mr. Jim Broton.

every nickel received. This was followed by other clever and profitable tricks with alligators. The show ended with the invitation to a hunt, one similar to that described by Dr. Albert M. Reese in his book, *The Alligator and its Allies*.²² Reese called Alligator Joe "a well-known hunter and guide" who, for "by no means a modest" fee, led tourists in a separate boat into the Everglades. Alligator Joe guaranteed that they would shoot an alligator, but it was suggested that Frazee had an accomplice release one when their boat passed by.

During the summer months, Frazee added to his income by traveling north with alligators and other animals and displaying them before curious onlookers. In 1903, he appeared on The Steel Pier, on the Boardwalk in Atlantic City, New Jersey.²³ Scientists also benefited from these appearances, as he presented two manatees to the New York Zoological Society.²⁴

Unfortunately for Frazee, his Palm Beach alligator farm was on land that was soon transformed into the resort town that is there today. Jungle Trail Road was graded and homesites sold.²⁵ Frazee must have felt the pressure of upcoming civilization, and he saw Miami as a less-developed place to relocate his alligators. In 1898, Frazee first appeared in Miami²⁶ displaying three large crocodiles, in order "to

advertise his skill as an alligator hunter and guide."²⁷ At some point, he started raising baby alligators at the junction of the Miami River and Wagner Creek, just beyond the western edge of the Miami city limits. The area was often wet, as it was located where the Allapattah Prairie overflowed into the Miami River. Frazee sold the alligators at the Royal Palm Hotel, located two miles downriver.

In 1903, W. I. Burch began providing tours along the Miami River and into the Everglades.²⁸ This made it easier for tourists to see the Richardson plantation, Musa Isle, with its many offerings, one of the city's finest tourist attractions. It also opened a door of opportunity for Frazee. In 1905, he took a lease on the land he was using from owner William Prout.²⁹ He expanded his hatching site and created the "Alligator Joe's Crocodile and Alligator Farm" tourist attraction.

Frazee worked hard to finish the farm for a Thanksgiving 1905 opening. Already by August, citizens were viewing more than 6,000 alligators, as well as newly-hatched ones.³⁰ Frazee's parents came from Jacksonville to spend the winter with him and helped him prepare the attraction for its opening.³¹ But an incident in nearby North Miami nearly dashed his plans. In November, Warren Frazee argued with a hack man who he felt was overcharging him. The carriage driver slammed Frazee in the face with a beer bottle, cutting him badly.³² In turn, Frazee knifed his opponent. Both were jailed, but luckily, this incident did not delay the opening of Alligator Joe's Crocodile and Alligator Farm. By mid-December, 1905, a tourist on the launch *Edith* was describing a trip to that "creepy" place.³³ For several years, Frazee performed both at the Miami and the Palm Beach sites.

Warren's only sibling, James Frazee, was three years older. Unlike Warren, his brother had stayed at home in Jacksonville, married and become a law officer.³⁴ Consequently, there may have been some rivalry between the two for their parents' affection. Now, Warren's close proximity to his parents, and the stress of the upcoming opening, may have contributed to that burst of anger resulting in the aforementioned fight... the only time it was ever reported that he lost his temper.

The first tourist season was a success for Frazee. At that time, tourists came to South Florida from Thanksgiving to Easter. To that work schedule, Frazee added northern performances throughout the summer months. Alligator Joe did not take a vacation.

In 1906, he was forced to concentrate his efforts in Miami. The road to his Palm Beach attraction was crushed-shell paved that year, and a second wheelchair service started, forcing riders to pay twice to get to the farm.³⁵ Tourists boycotted the new order, forcing Alligator Joe to set up a second attraction closer to town. This created alligator run-ins with the neighbors.³⁶ Residents began wishing that Alligator Joe would move.

Coincidentally, a new rock road leading to Alligator Joe's Miami farm was also finished in time for the 1906-07 season.³⁷ That year, the first Miami newspaper advertisement appeared for the attraction.³⁸ The launch *Sallie*, holding 27 passengers, also began making twice-daily stops there.³⁹

The stage was set for Frazee's professional and personal success in Miami. Many of the people taking those Miami boat tours were women. One of them, Miami resident Della Hamilton, was evidently attracted to Alligator Joe enough to want to get to know Warren Frazee. Love bloomed in the springtime, and Frazee married Della on May 9, 1906.⁴⁰

While he recited the wedding vows, a truckload of his alligators was on its way to Kansas City.⁴¹ In the summer of 1906, Frazee signed a contract to appear at Kansas City's Electric Park, one of several well-lighted amusement parks throughout the country created to encourage the use of electric streetcars.⁴² Frazee and Della honeymooned in Kansas City, arriving near the time for the opening of his alligator exhibit. It was the first year that Alligator Joe appeared in the area, and his show was well-received.

In Kansas City, concrete basins had been created for his act, with sand slopes set with tropical trees. At performances there, Alligator Joe got into a pen with 70 saurians and performed tricks with them. In a

different pen, he wrestled one.⁴³ A well-circulated article described an Electric Park wrestling match, where a grandstand had been built for visitors.⁴⁴ During a highly-choreographed performance, it appeared at times that the crocodile might win. After thrashing around in the water for awhile, Joe emerged victorious, with the saurian roped and subdued. After the match, a reporter asked Alligator Joe how he was able to subdue the reptiles. He responded: "Why, it ain't so hard. ... All Ah got to look out for is his jaws and his tail, an' when Ah gets out o' breath undeh water, Ah jus' kicks us both to the surface and takes a blow an' goes undeh with him again. It's jus' a mattah of tiring him out." An account of that summer's trip reported that Frazee brought home "a barrel of coin."⁴⁵

The next tourist season was also productive for Alligator Joe. In Palm Beach, he staged performances in the Atlantic Ocean, closer to the Royal Poinciana Hotel. There, he wrestled a 200-pound, 12-foot crocodile and brought it ashore. It was said that the mostly female, well-heeled audience "gasped until it was over, and then applauded smartly."⁴⁶

In the summer of 1907, Frazee attempted to simultaneously run two northern exhibits. Alligator Joe appeared at Wonderland Park on Revere Beach in Boston.⁴⁷ His father, Randolph, was at a second exhibit at Electric Park in Kansas City.⁴⁸ Afterwards, Warren Frazee stated that he did very well in Boston, but that his Kansas City show did not garner the money or the audience it did when Alligator Joe wrestled there.

A 1908 newspaper article declared that the Frazee attractions in Palm Beach and Miami were "the greatest exhibitions of its kind in the world."⁴⁹ The Miami farm now consisted of 14 pens containing from one to a hundred alligators. It also boasted of "the largest crocodile in captivity" and an alligator, "Jumbo Joe," measuring 18 feet, three inches in length.

That season, the Crocodile and Alligator Farm was again a stop for the Miami River tourist boat *Sallie*, the only boat allowed to stop at Alligator Joe's place. It claimed that the farm was "the only real

alligator and crocodile show in the country."⁵⁰ Frazee said that the two attractions gave him a "neat income" each year and that he had "many imitators, but no equals." He specifically complained about another "Alligator Joe" at Hot Springs, Arkansas, who, besides borrowing his ideas of business, had taken his name.

During the summer, Alligator Joe appeared in Paragon Park at Nantasket Beach, Massachusetts.⁵¹ The Boston attraction already boasted a "jungle" with baby lions. Alligator Joe added "600 alligators and crocodiles."⁵² Unfortunately, disappointments soon overshadowed his many successes.

With the economy sagging, the 1908-1909 season was a bad time for Frazee in Florida. The only Miami publicity was his picture in the newspaper with a crocodile.⁵³ It is not even clear that his attractions were open that year and the next, indicating turmoil in Frazee's professional and personal life.

Warren Frazee's alligator business had a serious competitor for the northern dollar. As evidence, a picture appeared in the *Washington Post* of "an alligator in harness" at the Arkansas Alligator Farm, being driven by Alligator Joe—Joseph Campbell.⁵⁴ To make matters worse, at some point, Warren Frazee and Della were divorced. Frazee's 64-year-old mother also passed away that year of an unspecified cause.⁵⁵ She had come to visit him in October and stayed for Thanksgiving and Christmas. Services were held at Trinity Episcopal Church and at Miami City Cemetery. Her remains were shipped to Jacksonville for burial in the Frazee family plot.

Frazee temporarily left South Florida, perhaps trying to put everything that had happened out of his mind. Alligator Joe appeared in Kansas City at Electric Park with a new show to make up for his father's efforts two years previously. He focused initially on manatees and displayed "the only ones in the world in captivity."⁵⁶ The large, homely manatees, however, may not have generated the excitement, or the gratuities, that he desired. Less than two months later, he went back to what had worked. A new show there claimed "Alligator Joe will wrestle one of the largest reptiles in his

Alligator Joe

Don't fail to see Alligator Joe's Great Crocodile and Alligator Farm this winter

IT HAS NO Comparison!

Advertisement from 1906 for Alligator Joe's Farm. *Miami Metropolis*, December 3, 1906.

The Bee Wizard, and commented: "I will ride a crocodile and play with an alligator, but you couldn't get me into the cage with those bees."⁵⁸ He had, however, recently been stung.

According to an account by Michael J. Helm, owner of the Electric Park attraction, Frazee "disappeared and was gone for two weeks ... When he came back, he said he intended to be married." The park owner convinced him to have the ceremony at Electric Park. "I'll give you the grandest wedding anyone ever had in the whole United States," Helm stated.⁵⁹

Cleopatra Croff, Warren Frazee's fiancé, was a 19-year-old farm girl from Carthage, Missouri. She was described as "a very pretty girl"⁶⁰ who was obviously impressed and intrigued by Frazee's expertise and travels. The wedding took place amid the fireworks and spectacle of the fair. After the ceremony, and for the fair's duration, the new Mrs. Alligator Joe Frazee stood with her husband under a wedding bell made of corn husks, mullet and other farm products, selling six-inch alligators for souvenirs.⁶¹

Warren and Cleopatra wintered in the warmth of South Florida at his first attraction site. Perhaps, though, they weren't living the Palm Beach lifestyle that she had heard about. Soon, she was ready to go on a real honeymoon, and Frazee took her to New York City. That summer, he also appeared at Dreamland Park on Coney Island.⁶²

Soon after arriving in June 1910, Mrs. Cleopatra Frazee was featured in *New York World* magazine with a photograph holding a young alligator. Little Ham, she said, was "in a bad way" until she took it in and "nursed him to his alligator self again." She thinks it is gratitude

collection—a feat never performed by any other living man."⁵⁷

Frazee stayed in Kansas City after the end of the 1909 Electric Park season to attend the Missouri Valley Fair. On opening day, he saw bees crawling over the face and hands of

that makes him hang around the boarding house, but Joe “thinks he is lazy.”⁶³

The alligator attraction was located on the west promenade of Dreamland Park (ironically, where the Pharaoh’s Daughter booth had previously been). The site was converted into a humid sub-tropical version of the Florida Everglades, featuring Frazee’s collection of 1,500 alligators, crocodiles and sea cows.⁶⁴ For the first time in a while, Warren had a happy wife and was enjoying himself. However, that soon ended. Returning before his animals, he was told that he had to vacate his Miami farm.⁶⁵

Frazee spent the rest of the year 1910 year in limbo. His Palm Beach attraction site was quickly becoming too civilized, and now it seems, the owner of his Miami site was about to kick him out. Frazee decided to make money in Miami for as long as possible. That year, the Biscayne Navigation Company made twice-daily trips to Alligator Joe’s Crocodile and Alligator Farm on the way up the Miami River to Musa Isle and to the Drainage Canal.⁶⁶

On April 1, 1911, advertisements began offering the Miami alligator farm land for sale.⁶⁷ Each showed a map without indicating the farm there. Some described it as “very desirable property.”⁶⁸ The joke was that the eight-acre site was classified “swamp and overflowed land” and was initially given to the state government, which sold it to early Miamian J. W. Ewan in 1892 for \$1 an acre.⁶⁹ Variations of the ad ran for almost a month.

Frazee was panicked. Soon, he would need to ship his act, consisting of thousands of reptiles, to Denver, Colorado, where he was scheduled to perform at the Lakeside Park amusement park. The advertised Miami property was finally sold to Richard J. Bolles for \$9,000.⁷⁰ At that time, Bolles was using questionable sales tactics to sell submerged Everglades land. Frazee negotiated a deal with Bolles to stay on the land, and soon thereafter, he and Cleopatra joined his alligators and crocodiles in Colorado.⁷¹

Little is known of that trip.⁷² It is likely he gave alligator wrestling performances, since the site is located on the banks of the large Lake Rhoda.⁷³ He also benefitted from taking the animals a long distance by rail. He would one day use that knowledge to good advantage, taking them even farther west.

Again, during the 1912 Miami season, The Biscayne Navigation Company made daily stops at the Alligator and Crocodile Farm.⁷⁴ Excitement occurred that year after three prisoners escaped from the police and ran toward the farm. They hid in the swamp near it and evaded the two officers who chased them.

In the summer of 1912, Frazee journeyed to Chicago, taking several carloads of his "uncanny pets," with him.⁷⁵ He appeared with his reptiles as "Alligator Joe" at the Forest Park Amusement Park from 1912 through 1914. The park was near the Des Plaines River. It contained a dazzling display of thousands of lights, a dizzying assortment of rides, including a large roller coaster, and a casino. In addition to Alligator Joe's act, the park also featured vaudeville performers and moving pictures.⁷⁶ Frazee transported 3,000 alligators there.⁷⁷ Someone who attended a performance said it was called Alligator Joe and his Educational Alligators.⁷⁸

As Frazee's popularity increased, so too did his weight. In 1899 he was described as "a handsome, muscular, ruddy-skinned fellow,"⁷⁹ but by 1906, it was said he "looks like a big, fat, harmless man" weighing 300 pounds.⁸⁰ By 1913, Frazee's weight had ballooned to 340 pounds.⁸¹ His large frame was probably inherited. When his brother, James Frazee, died in 1918 his obituary stated that he was a man "whose heart was as big as his body."⁸²

Miami baker John Seybold purchased the land where the alligator farm was located from Richard J. Bolles, in 1913.⁸³ That year, it was reported that Seybold was destroying and clearing away the Alligator Farm.⁸⁴ He spent the next several years improving the property to create the Spring Garden residential subdivision.⁸⁵

A written record of what happened to the farm or the animals after that sale has not been found. According to the memory of an eyewitness, Margaret Rogers Grutzbach, Frazee moved upriver approximately a quarter mile, before moving back to Jacksonville.⁸⁶ No evidence of Frazee at the upriver location has been found, however. Another source states that he spent several years in Jacksonville prior to his death.⁸⁷ But, Warren Frazee was not listed in the Jacksonville City Directory.

An advertisement card published after Frazee's 1914 Forest Park performances lists both his Miami and the Palm Beach attractions as being active and open.

The "Alligator Joe and crocodile lying down on wheelbarrow" picture was on one side, and on the other, readers were implored not to accept attractions by that name without the trademark picture. "Beware of frauds and imitators



Alligator Joe at his Miami attraction.
Courtesy of Jim Broton.

calling themselves 'Alligator Joe' and claiming to have a farm where they raise alligators. Not the original 'Alligator Joe' ..."⁸⁸

In 1914, Alligator Joe had still more competition from an unlikely source. Charles Thompson's aquarium opened on Miami Beach that year, housing "The Big Fish,"⁸⁹ a preserved, 30,000 pound whale-shark caught by Thompson in 1912.⁹⁰ At the attraction, Thompson also had six Everglades alligators that Buck Hamilton, a fisherman from Lake Okeechobee, captured.⁹¹ To make money, Frazee again looked westward.

The San Francisco area was devastated by the 1906 earthquake but underwent a fast rebirth. The government celebrated this recovery with a World's Fair, the Panama-Pacific Exposition, scheduled to open on February 20, 1915.⁹² In preparation for the fair, the state minted a Florida coin, with its sales receipts to be used to fund a State of Florida booth, at an estimated cost of \$200,000.⁹³

Plans included a Florida citrus exhibit, something that many in the state, including the Tampa Board of Trade, opposed.⁹⁴ The group feared that, even if the existing California ban on citrus was lifted, the quality of the fruit transported over a long distance could not compete with that of California. That idea was replaced with one where a booth would show moving pictures displaying Florida products. That plan was rejected as well.⁹⁵ These problems provided Frazee with an opportunity.

It was reported that Frazee garnered a lucrative contract with exhibition authorities⁹⁶ to display his specimens of Florida wildlife at the San Francisco fair.⁹⁷ Early in 1915, Frazee and his act began their long trip west by train.⁹⁸

On February 10, 1915, a train car filled with Alligator Joe's reptiles and a manatee arrived in San Francisco.⁹⁹ Several workers were overcome by the stench when they opened the car's door. Also, the manatee spilled out, requiring the Fire Department to rescue the animal and get it back into its tank. Workers then carefully transported it to The Zone, an area comprised of more than 40 amusement sites, to be displayed.

Warren Frazee's "Alligator Farm" booth contained more than 4,500 alligators and crocodiles, pelicans, blue herons and egrets.¹⁰⁰ It was located behind an Egyptian gateway, near a great plaster statue of Memnon, a reference to a mythological figure made immortal by the god Zeus.¹⁰¹ For 25 cents, visitors viewed his menagerie and were probably treated to his tricks, honed to perfection through years of practice. Cleopatra also did what she could to help. But Frazee's performances quickly came to a close.

In April, San Francisco's nighttime temperature can drop to the low 40s. This was not good for someone with Frazee's background and in his physical condition. That, and the excesses of food and adventure, finally caught up with him. On May 27, 1915, he was rushed to San Francisco's German Hospital, weak with a high fever. Four days later, Warren Frazee died of double pleural pneumonia and tonsillitis with

complicating factors of parenchymatous nephritis, diabetes and fatty degeneration of the heart.¹⁰² He was not quite 43 years of age and was survived by Cleopatra, and, reportedly a 3-year-old child.¹⁰³ Nothing more is known of the child. Warren Frazee was cremated, and his remains were said to have been returned to Jacksonville for burial. However, no record of that has been found.

The Panama Pacific show continued for a short time after Frazee's death, perhaps run by Cleopatra. Without Alligator Joe's antics, though, the exhibit was panned: "As exemplars of natural pulchritude they were total, unmitigated, outrageous failures, especially the crocodiles, who had an uncanny habit of hauling out on the sandy rims of their tanks and going to sleep with their mouths open."¹⁰⁴

An appraiser was asked to estimate the value of Frazee's collection before the San Francisco Superior Court after Cleopatra, as executrix, could not do that.¹⁰⁵ The menagerie included alligators and crocodiles, as well as a sea turtle, nine pelicans, two raccoons, two ducks, and six blue herons. The total value was estimated to be \$5,295. Those animals were then shipped to San Diego and appeared for a second year at the Panama-California Exposition.¹⁰⁶ The body of "Alligator Joe's" celebrated manatee was donated to the California Academy of Sciences, which kept its skin and skeleton.¹⁰⁷

Frazee's Miami attraction opened one last time for Christmas in 1915.¹⁰⁸ Charles Thompson's associate, Will J. "Buck" Hamilton, managed it and took credit for Alligator Joe's success, which could not be farther from the truth.¹⁰⁹ After Frazee's death, Hamilton took a summer trip to California and visited the Fair. Afterwards, he said he "acted as manager for Alligator Joe's exhibit" while he was there.¹¹⁰ Meanwhile at Palm Beach, Alligator Jim was being called the successor to Alligator Joe.¹¹¹ Soon, other Miami alligator attractions would replace Alligator Joe's farm farther up the Miami River. Henry Coppinger Jr., and his brothers started wrestling alligators at their father's riverfront homestead in 1917,¹¹² and an alligator farm opened at Musa Isle in 1921.¹¹³



Photograph of Alligator Joe.
Courtesy of Jim Broton.

Weeks after Frazee's death, his old nemesis, Alligator Joe Campbell, showed alligators, perhaps Frazee's, at Electric Park in Kansas City.¹¹⁴ Campbell reportedly "found no profit in it," so he sold them to the local zoo. Campbell subsequently moved to

Jacksonville and there created The Florida Alligator Farm. Ironically, this new attraction was near where Warren Frazee was born, and where he may have developed his interest in alligators. To the next generations of Florida tourists, Campbell became "Alligator Joe."

An exception to this appeared in a 1921 article in *The Miami Herald* that indicated the extent to which Frazee's accomplishments were attributed to someone else. Written by Rev. F. A. Bisbee, it described several Miami River tourist sites.¹¹⁵ Though Bisbee had not been there recently, he said that Alligator Joe was "a very old Indian, with a great thatch of snow-white hair, and he can speak the alligator language, and they know his voice, and that is more than presidents of colleges can do!" The newspaper did not challenge that description.

History has been unusually kind to Alligator Joe Campbell. In the popular media, many of Frazee's accomplishments have been attributed to Campbell, who is buried in Jacksonville's Evergreen Cemetery. A stone alligator rests on his monument.¹¹⁶ Even in the city where he was born, the original Alligator Joe, Warren Frazee, was soon forgotten.

Warren Frazee's name sometimes is not even spelled correctly. A 1952 Palm Beach newspaper photograph of him is captioned Alligator Joe Frazier,¹¹⁷ an error originally seen in an earlier *New York Times* story.¹¹⁸ A recent, brief account of Alligator Joe and his Palm Beach life, however, is accurate and enlightening.¹¹⁹

Granted, Warren Frazee was dealing with what some might call an undesirable commodity. Regardless, Frazee's accomplishments, in less than 20 years, are impressive. He gained nationwide recognition as a performer and an alligator expert. He arranged successful contracts with government officials, scholars, Seminole Indians, carnival owners and railroad agents. Warren Frazee was cheered by wreck salvagers and aristocrats, and respected by all. He was good to his parents, and he loved his wives, to the extent that he could. His driving force appeared to be the need to educate the public about alligators, "those fantastic creatures." Indirectly, that led to his untimely death. Perhaps, however, his spirit has been waiting and is ready now to be rediscovered as the South Florida entrepreneur, entertainer and pioneer that he truly was.

Notes

- 1 "Puts Spell on Alligator," *Washington Post*, June 27, 1915.
- 2 "'Alligator Joe's Unique Exhibit,'" *Miami Metropolis*, April 16, 1907.
- 3 Alligator Joe Campbell Article "Ostrich Riding Little Lady Talks Alligators to Shore" Lee's Trees. A Genealogical Forest, <http://freepages.genealogy.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~leestrees/hicampbell.html> (accessed June 1, 2007).
- 4 "Hibernating Habits of the Alligator On Arkansas Farm," *Washington Post*, January 20, 1907.
- 5 Alligator Joe Campbell Article "Ostrich Riding Little Lady Talks Alligators to Shore" Lee's Trees. A Genealogical Forest, <http://freepages.genealogy.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~leestrees/hicampbell.html> (accessed June 1, 2007).
- 6 "A Famous Alligator Passes in his checks," *Miami Metropolis*, August 20, 1904.
- 7 Bill Foley, "Jacksonville History Ripe with Tales of Roaming Reptiles," *Florida Times Union*, July 27, 1997.
- 8 "'Alligator Joe's` Unique Exhibit.'" *Miami Metropolis*, April 16, 1907.
- 9 United States Census for 1880, Heritage Quest Online, <http://heritagequestonline.com> (accessed June 1, 2007).
- 10 *Webb's Jacksonville East and South Consolidated Directory*, volume VII, (1887).
- 11 "Warren Frazee, Alligator Trainer" Certificate of Death, California State Board of Health, German Hospital #3261.
- 12 *Vance's Jacksonville and St. Augustine Directory*, Volume III (1897).
- 13 Thelma Peters, *Lemon City. Pioneering on Biscayne Bay 1850-1925*, (Miami, Fla.: Banyan Books, 1976), 123.

- 14 "Alligators Are Fond of Dogs," *Wheeling (West Virginia) Sunday Register*, July 11, 1897.
- 15 "The Crocodile and Alligator," *Miami Metropolis*, February 4, 1898.
- 16 "Alligator Joe," *Miami Metropolis*, January 14, 1898.
- 17 "A Big Sale of Alligator Hides," *Miami Metropolis*, September 22, 1899.
- 18 "Crocodile vs. 'Gator," *Miami Metropolis*, July 30, 1897.
- 19 "While in Palm Beach Don't Fail to Visit the Florida Alligator Farm and 'Alligator Joe,'" Christmas Advertisement *Weekly Lake Worth News*, December 1900.
- 20 George G. Currie, *Map of West Palm Beach, Lake Worth and Palm Beach, Florida*. (Chicago, Rand McNally & Co., 1907), unpaginated, stand alone map.
- 21 "On an Alligator Hunt," *Sioux City Journal*, March 2, 1899.
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