

The Snake King of Brownsville

By NORMAN ROZEFF

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Manuel King

Over its 170 year history Brownsville has seen more than its share of unusual characters. One, a benign individual, who would top the list is a man that became known as “Snake” King. His given name was actually William Abraham Lieberman.

He was born in Russia/Poland on June 26, 1877. The immigration of his parents, Abraham Harry Abner Lieberman and his wife Jeanette Jennie Annie Ruben Citrombaum Lieberman, may have been precipitated by the numerous pogroms that led to the immigration of millions of Eastern European Jews to this country.

His mother came with him in 1896 as recorded in the June 1900 US Census of Camden, New Jersey where the family was then living. His father, a shoe maker, had preceded the family to the United States in 1893. A younger sister to William, Rosie, would be born in New Jersey in December 1898. Eleven-year-old William was then in the fourth grade.

For whatever reason the then 52-year-old William or some family member told the 1930 Census taker that he had been born in New York. This discrepancy is repeated in the 1940 census. We know little about William's education but must infer that he was no scholar as he eventually embarked on a career as a snake handler for a traveling circus. He soon came to the realization that circuses and the like could use the services of an importer of unusual animals. He was then filled this unusual niche as attested to his numerous travels abroad, even one to the Far East.

Why the short in stature William selected Brownsville in which to settle at the turn of the 20th Century is unknown though the circus may have played in the city at that time. In any case he soon met and married Texas born Manuela Cortez.

Their oldest child Joseph "Joe" (Lieberman) King was born December 3, 1904. At what exact point in time Abraham commenced using the surname King is unknown but it was fairly early as attested to a ship's manifest of November 15, 1911 wherein he is listed as William King. He had departed from Manila on what appears to be one of his many exotic animal buying sprees for his own enterprise and for other entities. He had legally changed his surname to King as a reflection of those in the community who had given him the moniker the "Snake King of Brownsville".

The Snakeville complex, later Snakeville Zoo, on Old Alice Road was already established by the year 1918. Brownsville's mild climate was suitable for such an undertaking. In addition to the numerous species of snakes available to be seen there were numerous exotic birds with colorful plumage, lions and their cubs, monkeys, reptiles, and small bears. Surprisingly King sometimes listed himself as a "naturalist," a term that currently carries with it some prestige.

Ever the flamboyant entrepreneur, King would avail himself of numerous opportunities to publicize his doings and that of Brownsville. One of his more wild stunts was to ride a burro from Brownsville to the state capital at Austin.

This was in order to publicize the 1914 annual Mid-Winter Fair to take place at Fort Brown. Upon arriving in Austin King rode the burro up the steps of the state Capitol and then extended an invitation to Governor O.B. Colquitt to attend the fair. The governor later did so. One of the more unusual events that year at the fair was a snake bagging contest. This event was caught on film that eventually was deposited in the archives of the Library of Congress. It depicts King and Manuela winning the competition in three

minutes and 45 seconds during which time one competitor withdrew after another was bitten by a snake.

By the May 1930 US Census of Brownsville the family unit, living on Alice Road, consisted of Abraham, born March 16, 1911; William Jr., December 1, 1912; Pauline K., born 1917; and Manuel Morris, September 5, 1923.

And in noting Manuel mention of his unusual upbringing must be recorded.

Having grown up and been raised near wild creatures neither of Manuel's parents greatly feared his interaction with them.

The elder King marked his son's 10th birthday with the gift of 10 lion cubs - and lessons from veteran one-armed lion trainer John "Chubby" Guilfoyle.

What evolved was that Manny became a lion trainer at the astounding age of 11. He was even to appear as a loin-clad jungle child in the movie "Darkest Africa". This film starred famed lion trainer Clyde Beatty and was filmed in Snakeville and surrounds. Manny would continue his interest in wildlife in a lifelong career in various circus and carnival capacities.

Despite his early exposure to danger Manny lived to the ripe old age of 92.

His father, The Snake King, died at age 75 on November 11, 1952. He had experienced cancer for eight months. His remains are buried in the Buena Vista Burial Park. His mother Manuela, who was born October 8, 1882, died at age 82 on October 18, 1964 and is interred in the Old City Cemetery, Brownsville.