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Federal Writers' Project

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"RATTLESNAKE CANNERY"

by Federal Writers' Project

Editors' Note: The Work Projects Administration (WPA) was created in 1935 as part of the New Deal effort to provide work relief to the unemployed. WPA tried to put people to work on meaningful jobs where they could use their expertise. This meant government-run projects in fields ranging from construction to the arts. Even unemployed historians and folklorists found jobs under the Federal Writers' Project, which funded research for a series of guides for each of the forty-eight states.

As in other states, the Writers' Project in Florida sent researchers into the field to study the cultural, economic, and social lives of ordinary people. So much material was accumulated that much of it never appeared in the resulting state guide, *Florida: A Guide to the Southernmost State* (New York). However, typed summaries of the original findings are available in archives, and they can provide important documentation for historians.

The following document is a colorful description of what one researcher found during a 1936 visit to a "rattlesnake cannery" near Arcadia, Florida. A copy of the original typescript is located in the Special Collections Department of the University of South Florida Library.

The rattlesnake has ever been classified among man's deadliest foes. Now it has been converted into an item of his economic life, a delectable addition to his diet, and is also contributing its bit toward science. Instead of being hunted only to be despised and destroyed, it is now sought by trained hunters and handled as a valuable cargo to be brought alive to the rattlesnake cannery.

This canning of rattlesnake is an [sic] unique enterprise, though yet in its infancy. The only cannery known at present (1936) is that of the Florida Products Corporation, located at the home of Mr. and Mrs. George K. End, eight miles east of Arcadia, Fla.

Several years ago Mr. End, emulating the hero who first ate an oyster, cooked the white glistening flesh of a rattlesnake and found it not only edible but delicious. He packed some of this novel product in cans and in order to sense the public reaction to it, served rattlesnake to a group of Legionnaires [sic] at a Florida convention. The Legionnaires went for it in a big way. Newspaper columnists followed up this event and presently Mr. End found himself swamped with orders from all over the country for the canned rattlesnake. The Florida Products Corporation, now in its fourth year, was the result.

The hunters use six foot bamboo poles in catching the snakes, and this process is an art in itself, as some of the rattlers weigh fifteen pounds or more, and must be carefully handled to be brought in alive and uninjured. They are then placed in a specially prepared pen until slaughter day.

The territory in the immediate vicinity of the cannery has been so thoroughly hunted that few snakes [sic] are left. But plenty of virgin rattlesnake territory remains in the "big prairie" of DeSoto County and adjacent lands. The demand is fast outgrowing the supply, and means must

be found to facilitate matters in supplying the demand. Hence the industry bids fair to be a prosperous one.

On slaughter days the rattlers are decapitated, the carcasses hung up to bleed thoroughly, and then dressed and skinned. The preparation for canning follows the most scientific methods so as to result in a beautifully blended and seasoned product. When prepared in approved style, the delicacy resembles chicken a-la-king in looks and taste, but with a flavor all its own.

In addition to the canned product, part of the catch, consisting of choice bits of meat, are hickory smoked and marketed in small flakes as "Snakesnacks" put up in celophane [sic] packages. These taste very much like smoked herring, and are good served with beer, wine, cocktails, or other beverages.

The venom is extracted from the snakes while they are still alive, and is bottled and sent to laboratories where it is used by scientists in the compounding of anti-venom. The fangs are also bottled and sent to universities and colleges to be used by professors in their class room exhibits.

The skins are carefully stretched and cured, and are converted into de luxe leather articles, - coats, hats, purses, belts, sandals and novelties. The backbones are dissected and carefully cleaned and polished. Then with a few agile strokes of a pen dipped in indelible ink, grotesque faces are made on the various sides of each little vertebrae, making interesting novelties. These are supposed to be good luck charms, and can be worn on necklaces, bracelets, or watch fobs. The fats are converted into pharmeceuticals [sic].

Thus with very little waste, every part of the diamond-back rattlesnake is utilized for some good purpose. In a few short years it has become the epicurean's delight, the essence of style to the modish woman, an asset to sciences, and the last word in the successful wooing of Lady Luck. It has been introduced as such to the four corners of the globe, and has found its way into the highways and byways.

Visitors to the cannery at the home of Mr. and Mrs. End, are offered samples of rattlesnake, and those who partake are supplied with membership cards in the "Ancient and Epicurean Order of Reptile Revelers" with the privileges of being "hailed, coiled, and rattled at all times."