



12-31-1970

"I Do," Included a Zoo

Annie Atkin Tanner
70 E. 800 N., Provo, Utah

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/gbn>

Recommended Citation

Tanner, Annie Atkin (1970) "'I Do,' Included a Zoo," *Great Basin Naturalist*: Vol. 30 : No. 4 , Article 2.
Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/gbn/vol30/iss4/2>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Western North American Naturalist Publications at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Great Basin Naturalist by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.

"I DO," INCLUDED A ZOO

Annie Atkin Tanner¹

I married a zoologist, and the honeymoon had scarcely waned when I began to realize that I held only second place in my husband's interest—second place to every creeping, crawling, living thing.

His first love was a new species, be it a weevil, a reptile, a fish, or a bird. At first it was hard to believe that I was not essential to his happiness as I had so egotistically thought. Nothing was so important in his life as an infinitesimal insect, new to his collection.

My only consolation was his jubilant smile and enthusiastic conversation when, after many weeks, he received a letter from the Smithsonian Institution or the California Academy of Sciences, saying that a microscopic beetle he had sent them was a new species that would be named *tanneri* after him. This seemed prophetically significant. He gave me his name, but he also gave it to an insect.

Two years of married life added a Model T and a baby girl to our collection. My husband was a little disappointed when Carol defied the Mendelian law and had dark hair instead of sandy like his; there was also some sorrow that she wasn't a new collector. Despite this, defeat in a zoologist is never admitted, at regular intervals we added number two, three, and four girls before our only son was born.

It was when this son was very young that we knew he would never be a zoologist. Our local church was having a carnival and they asked our children to exhibit our snake collection as an attraction; and so the family reptiles were taken to the carnival.

The exciting moment came when the children were ready to go on the stage. Marilyn had a blow snake and a red-racer wrapped around her neck; Carmela's two black king snakes were wriggling rebelliously in her hand; and our son held a grass snake by the head.

The little girls performed like troupers, but just as four-year-old Jordan held up his snake for the audience to see, the perverse creature wound itself around his arm. With instinctive fear, he pulled the snake from his arm and threw it far across the stage into the wings, where it was retrieved by his chagrined father.

From that day on, my husband often looked at Jordan and then reproachfully at me and concluded, "I am convinced that environment in the home is a more powerful force than heredity." It was a subject we didn't mention, but both of us knew our son would never be a scientist.

As far as the family was concerned, the car we had saved money to buy was only a means of getting to a new place to collect. Our

¹Mrs. Vasco M. Tanner, 70 East 800 North, Provo, Utah.

trips were always to the desert, the sand-dunes, or the brush land. There was not time in the zoologist's life for the canyons or the lakes.

On arriving at our destination, out from the trunk of the car came the cyanide collecting bottles, and the insect nets. Singing happily, my husband disappeared into the vastness of the desert.

The children hunted rocks or played hide-and-seek, but the day grew hot and the water in the canvas bag became sickly warm by noon—so warm that we could go without a drink rather than swallow this canvas-flavored liquid.

In midafternoon the mosquitoes came, not in polite groups of a few hundred, but in plague-like multitudes. They swarmed over us, and my worries began, for no longer to me was the mosquito just a pest; he was the carrier of deadly malaria. I tried to watch each one that flew on the children to see if there were spots on its wings, for this I now had learned was the dreaded *Anopheles*—the female that transmitted malaria.

Just as dusk came on and I was worn out with fighting what I thought was my last fight with malaria, my husband returned to the car with the smile of a conqueror on his face.

We all gathered around him, while he showed us the success of his day's work. Carefully, with small tweezers, he took from the small gas chambers of the cyanide jars, a green tiger beetle, a red and black beetle, and a mourning-cloak butterfly. A large bottle filled with formaldehyde was the repository of a lizard, a rattlesnake or, perhaps a lowly centipede.

After we had admired and shuddered at these creatures of the desert, they were carefully stored away and the work of getting ready for the night began.

The children gladly ran to hunt rocks to anchor the tent poles; I bathed the baby in a pint of water in a tin washbasin and then came the process of cooking supper over a campfire. The children loved this part of the day; they lighted sticks in the fire and enjoyed the smoke-flavored hamburgers and fried potatoes. My joy came when they were peacefully sleeping, each in his own cot, with cool night breezes to refresh their tired little bodies. When this time came, I stretched out on my hard bed and breathed the fresh, cool air in quiet content. My contentment was short-lived, for soon my



ANNIE ATKIN TANNER

zoologist had a card table up, all his bottles out, and his net leaning hopefully against the table. The car lights were turned on and then the desert became the gathering place for all the night insects. They came from far and near, attracted to their death by the bright lights. These insects, some of them, crawled on our faces, under our arms, and beneath the covers. They had a concert. bass beetles and mosquito tenors, and a deadly hum made the night hideous. I covered my head and the children restlessly hit at the bugs.

When I had come out from the covers for air, I pleaded with the entomologist to please turn out the lights, but he was so fascinated with his happy hunting ground that my entreaties were literally wasted on the desert air.

The exciting beauty of the early morning made us forget the invasion of the night before, and soon we were traveling the long, smooth miles toward home. The children and I were given instructions to watch the road carefully and report immediately if a snake should cross in front of the car. Suddenly one of the girls would scream, "Daddy, there goes a blow-snake," or "There goes a rattle-snake."

With a groaning of brakes and a heaving jerk, the car settled down and out jumped the collector. With a forked stick in one hand and a burlap sack in the other, the battle began. The children cried in fear that the snake might bite their father; I sat in grim wonderment, wishing that a snake had never been created. When this evil creature of Eve's downfall had been securely tied in the sack and placed between the two seats of the car below the children's feet, my husband settled down contentedly in the front seat. All the rest of the way home, we either listened to the hissing of one snake or the ominous rattle of another. I sat in uneasy fear lest one would escape and bite the children, who kept their feet on the seat all the way home.

One rainy night, on a vacation trip to the Grand Canyon, we had pitched our tent in the Kaibab Forest. All the family were asleep, but I couldn't close my eyes as I listened to the strange night sounds around me. The moaning of the wind in the pine trees, silhouetted against a lightning-splashed sky; the drip-dropping of the rain running off the tent and hitting on a tin can; the indescribable sound of some strange wild animal in terrible torment, made sleep impossible.

I sat up in bed; my throat tightened with fear as I looked at the burnt-orange coals of our camp fire. Around it were ten or more grotesque monsters with flat, fantastic heads and bodies like prehistoric lizards. I screamed, and my husband, who was snoring in his cot, jumped up and angrily asked, "What on earth is the matter?" I pointed to the fire and weakly asked, "What are those awful creatures?"

He began to laugh and calmly answered, "Why, those are harmless salamanders; they have come in out of the rain to get warm. Now will you please go to sleep?"

When I was sure our amphibian visitors meant no harm, my heartbeats slowed down, but soon I again heard that unearthly cry in the forest. I barely whispered, "Is that a mountain lion?"

"It is only a friendly hoot-owl. Will you let me have a little sleep before morning?" This was the comforting answer from the man in the nearby cot.

We all enjoyed Bright Angel Point in the canyon, but we spent most of our two days' vacation turning over the water-soaked logs and muddy rocks to look for the elusive beetle that was found only in this forest. The vacation, wet as it was, was considered a real success when we found one beetle new to western America.

We returned home dry and safe. I was glad the vacation was over; no more monsters, no more hoot-owls, no sand, no rain, and home meant clean white sheets and a warm bath. But all was not at peace at home; on the front doorstep was a wire cage with a rattlesnake shaking its rattles at us as we stepped near the cage. On the other side of the step was a shoebox with small holes punched in the lid. The girls were delighted when they opened the box, for there was a "beautiful, green grass snake." Marilyn, with the face of a young angel, took the snake fondly in her hands and smiled sweetly as the cold-blooded thing wriggled up her arm and coiled itself around her throat.

As I looked at her all I could think was, "Did I raise my child to be a snake charmer?"

In a few minutes the snake dropped to the floor of the living room and slithered itself under the davenport. I ran for the broom, but by the time I returned the snake had disappeared.

This was the "skeleton in our closet." For many months we searched our beds each night; and everyday I expected to see its lidless green eyes peer out at me from some dark corner. We never saw it again.

One day in September a neighbor's child was playing with a brown water snake, which slipped out of his hands and made good its escape.

From that day until the snow fell, that snake was always present. If I hung out the family wash, he peeked at me from behind a box or from a sheet on the line; so winter came that year with a real welcome.

Every year little boys and men bring huge, hairy, black tarantulas in bottles and I have to look at them until they are taken to the laboratory. Each spring frogs die in my fruit bottles; and summer finds turtles pastured on the back lawn. They always stretch their long, wrinkled necks to reach a dry leaf; I think they must have a nostalgic longing for the desert and have no appetite for grass.

Often at night I think of the low, black hills of my home town in southern Utah. On the slick, lava rocks of those hills, there was one huge boulder I called my rock of inspiration. From its solid foundation, I learned Lincoln's Gettysburg Address and "The Man without a Country." My high school friend and I always sat on it

to read "The Lady of the Lake" or "God's in His Heaven, All's Right with the World."

It was on warm, spring days that I wrote poems and dreamed of the wonderful things I would do. On winter days, I slept the hours of youth away on this rock in the southern sunshine. On the first days of April, I knew the joy of seeing the first orchid sego lily open its waxen petals and the cactus wren build her nest in the prickly pear tree.

When I first went to those hills with my husband, his collecting instinct made him forget to look at the river below, with yellow cottonwoods along its banks. He didn't even seem interested in my Rock of Inspiration. All he saw was the huge crevice in it, from which he pulled a yellow and black Gila monster, twelve inches in length. My paradise was lost forever.

My loved hills became, from then to now, the home of snakes, lizards, Gila monsters, and centipedes.

It has taken many years for me to concede that I have been defeated by an invisible army that is hidden under every rock, every bush, and in the trees and in "the waters under the earth."

Now I am quite reconciled to the fact that in Nature's plan, and in the mind of a zoologist, the female of the species is only important for the part she plays in reproducing the species. This part I have played.