

An Education for His Future: Unraveling Ross Allen's Experience at Stetson University

Ross Allen is a renowned Herpetologist whose name is preserved throughout history and the scientific world. Much is known about Ross Allen's life and the contributions he's made to science thanks to the biography entitled *Adventures with Reptiles*. The biography is written on Ross's behalf by C.J. Hylander who worked closely with Allen to write and verify the information within the book. Among the one hundred and seventy- four paged biography is a short paragraph on Allen's attendance at John B. University, better known today as Stetson University. As with all students attending Stetson today, we enter the university with differing passions and interests and we leave this historical place to create our own history. It is through the exceptional sources and the encouraging professors and staff at Stetson that our passions turn into professions in which bring us great success and happiness. In order to unravel the experience Ross Allen had while attending John B. University we must begin with his background, how his interests for nature developed, and ultimately how Stetson stood as a doorway between his passions and his legacy as a herpetologist.

Wrangling slithering venomous snakes and wrestling prehistoric alligators is not the profession most parents have in mind for their son's future. For Charles and Florence Allen this would become a forthcoming reality for their son Ensil, better known as Ross. Ross Allen was born January 2, 1908 in Pittsburgh Pennsylvania (1). His father Charles Allen was a devoted advertising specialist who had dreams of Ross following in his footsteps. Ross on the other hand, was beginning to possess interests in activities greatly contrasting those of a sophisticated businessman. According to Hylander, Ross recalls listening to hunting stories narrated by his uncle, Bishop Lester E. Smith, whose stories served as a source of inspiration for Ross to venture

into the woods and create his own “hunting” stories (1). Through each excursion into the woods, Ross and his younger brother Oliver would capture creatures whose habitats would become cages within their bedrooms.

Ross was quickly approaching fifth grade when his family decided to leave Pennsylvania for Akron, Ohio (1). It was here in Ohio that Ross’s passion for nature would continue to develop. The Ohio woodlands equipped Ross with an unending supply of squirrels in which he could practice his skills of trapping and tanning their skins; a skill which would later allow for Ross to have his own taxidermy business (1). The Ohio woodlands also served as the foundation for Ross’s understanding of how to capture a snake, ultimately allowing Ross to capture sixty-four snakes to sell at a visiting circus. In 1920 at the age of twelve, Ross crossed paths with the Boy Scouts, an organization whose interests in nature matched his. Through Boy Scouts, Ross acquired skills such as swimming which in the future would allow Ross to dive into murky swamp waters and collect live alligators for research and display (1).

While Ross’s passion for nature was intensifying in Ohio, the real estate boom was beginning to sweep across the state of Florida. Advertisements in Florida newspapers from 1924 began to transmit messages claiming of “getting rich” by buying cheap land and selling it for higher prices (2). In response to the motivating advertisements, copious amounts of northerners fled to this “Land of Prosperity”. As the land boom was unfolding throughout Florida, advertisements for realtors insurance began to appear in the Stetson Collegiate newspaper. An advertisement from 1924 advises readers to get their realtors insurance from the V.W. Gould Insurance Agency situated on W. Indiana Avenue (3). News about the prosperity in Florida spread to northerners like wildfire, ultimately making its way into the Allen household. As a result, Ross and his family moved to Winter Haven, Florida when Ross was sixteen (1).

Unknowingly, the environment of Winter Haven served as a naturalist's paradise with its, "secluded swamps and ponds teemed with alligators, turtles, and cottonmouth moccasins" (1).

Thus Ross found himself in the midst of a state that would provide him with a new and exciting environment filled with many curiosities.

Much of Ross's knowledge about nature and animals interacting with their environment was obtained simply by observing them. Hylander reports, "He spent hours tracking them to their lairs, watching them lay their eggs, get their food, battle their enemies. He also learned by experience how to catch them alive, even the dangerous species... and he patiently discovered how best to keep them alive for study and exhibition purposes" (1). The information he gained from spending hours within the wilderness made traditional school work unappealing. In an effort to compromise with Ross, the principal at Winter Haven High School allowed Ross to take an irregular course of study with classes focusing on biology in order to further his special interests. While this course of study appealed to Ross, it didn't give him credits towards a diploma (1). Like most high school seniors in today's society, Ross began to consider attending college. After analyzing archival records, it can only be assumed that Ross got in touch with John B. University not only because of the proximity of Deland to Winter Haven, but because of the countless advertisements for the university. One convincing advertisement appeared on March 17, 1925 in the Stetson Collegiate exclaiming, "Why not choose Stetson for your college training" then lists all of the degrees available (4). Other Stetson Collegiate newspaper advertisements from 1925 read: Seniors of Florida, do you realize that...STETSON is a Good School, Investigate STETSON before choosing Your College (5). Another advertisement read "For a Liberal Education choose STETSON, the Best education under ideal living conditions" (4).

According to Hylander, Ross entered John B. University in 1927. Shockingly, as the John B. Registrar and Grade Book from 1920-1929 was located in the duPont-Ball library archives, Ross actually entered as a second year student in the DeLand Academy on January 4, 1926 (6). The DeLand Academy was a preparatory school that provided the requirements Ross would need to be eligible to attend the university (7). The John B. University required students to have obtained a total of 16 credits in order to be admitted, credits in which Ross didn't have (8). Such information of Ross actually attending the DeLand Academy in 1926 instead of 1927 poses a breakthrough in research towards what has been reported about Ross's attendance at Stetson. Archives and records revolving around Ross Allen have lain dormant in the duPont- Ball library until now as they were collected and organized to tell a "new" story about Ross that has never before been exposed. This story is that of Ross Allen's possible experience at Stetson and how Stetson remained a part of his life forever.

Even though Ross wasn't qualified to enter the actual university, he did have two professions in mind: engineering and biological science. His interest in engineering came from his work as an assistant surveyor where he could spend his days out-doors (1). These interests are shown in Ross's class schedule he had while attending the academy during the spring semester: Biology, Mechanical Drawing, and English. In addition, the Grade Book from 1926 also shows that Ross received an A in Mechanical Drawing, a B+ in English, and a B+ in biology (9). It is interesting to note that the grading system during the 1920s issued an A for grades between a 91-100, a B for grades between 81-90, a C for grades between 71-80 and a D was unacceptable (9).

The course description for his Biology class consisted of cell development and the physiology of the cell. The Biology class was taught by Professor Thomas Ovid Mary. His Mechanical Drawing class was comprised of practice in handling drawing instruments, preparing

working drawings, and using the drawing to make blue prints. The textbook for the Mechanical Drawing class was called, *Engineering Drawing, French, Revised 1924 Edition* and the class was taught by Professor Curtis Milton Lowry. His English class focused on literature from Beowulf to Barns and was taught by Mary Estelle Tribble (8). These course descriptions provide for a unique insight into the material covered in Biology and English classes from the 1920s compared to the material of today.

In the biological field, Ross's interest developed as he learned all he could from his teachers and from the books in the college library. The Sampson Library housed 32,000 volumes of books along with collections of American magazines and reviews such as National Geographic magazines and Scientific Monthly Reviews which would have all provided Ross with resources to strengthen his knowledge in the sciences (8). An article appearing in the Stetson Collegiate from 1925 states that the Sampson Library housed the largest collection of books in the state of Florida and was the most modern building on campus at the time (4). The university also provided ten science laboratories housed in Flagler Science Hall where students were equipped with several compound and dissecting microscopes, jars filled with animals to be dissected, and skeleton models for studying vertebrate systems of animals (8). A picture taken from within Flagler Hall during the 1920s strengthens the understanding of what the science labs looked like and the materials they provided (10). Another resource John B. University provided was the Monroe Heath Museum of Natural History. The museum was divided into three divisions that consisted of Mineralogy, Geology, and Marine Biology (8). The Geology division displayed collections of objects such as fossils from plant and animal kingdoms found in varying geological strata throughout the world. These fossils could have allowed Ross to learn about animals and nature life that exist in places far different from Florida. The Marine Biology

division of the museum presented collections of several marine organisms such as corals, sponges, and starfish which could have also provided Ross with information of animals other than reptiles. In addition to the library and museum, there was a collection of over eighty Florida birds that was given as a gift by John B. Stetson (8). Hylander reports that Ross enjoyed classifying animals on hunting trips with the Boy Scouts and therefore, the collection of birds could have allowed Ross to practice classifying the birds (1).

Due to the extensive resources John B. Stetson University provided for Ross and Ross's consistent passion for nature, a situation soon developed in which he knew more than his biology teacher. Even though Ross had acquired a more detailed understanding of biology than his teacher, his professor encouraged Ross to seek out the natural environment DeLand had to offer (1). One place in particular that was frequently advertised in the Stetson Collegiate was DeLeon Springs. The advertisements for DeLeon Springs encouraged students to come and enjoy their natural spring pool and ensured students that it would be "the" place to go to in the upcoming spring/summer months (5).

Aside from academic resources John B. University would have supplied Ross with; Ross's dormitory assignment was in Conrad Hall. The location of the building would have placed Ross in the middle of the excitement that went on throughout the day (8). In the back of a Stetson Collegiate newspaper from 1926 there is a business directory which at the time would have given students guidance towards locating services the community provided. From looking at the directory today, it allows the viewer to compare and contrast the services DeLand offered in the 1920s to the services DeLand provides students with today (11). One advertisement in the Stetson Collegiate is from the Dreka Department Store greeting Stetson students of the present past and future to shop in the various departments the store offered (4). Businesses downtown

DeLand not only thrived for student business, but they also avidly supported Stetson as evidenced in a photo with Stetson memorabilia lining the store's walls (10). A picture from 1927 illustrates Woodland Boulevard and what the environment was like for students strolling down the road lined with growing oak trees and their Spanish moss flowing in the wind (10). A map of DeLand in 1927 reveals carefully drawn streets that once aided its viewers in finding their way throughout DeLand along with illustrating the different routes Ross may have taken to explore the surroundings of DeLand (12).

In the wake of the excitement of the developing DeLand community, the Florida Real Estate boom that had attracted several northerners to Florida was coming to a close. Land prices collapsed and hundreds of investors including Ross's father found themselves bankrupt. As a result, Ross decided not to continue with college (1). Ross had hope that studying engineering at John B. University would provide him with a solid career in surveying, but now that the boom was crashing, the extensive curriculum to complete a degree in engineering seemed useless and unexciting (1).

Due to the decrease in income of money, by analyzing the John B. University bulletin from 1926 we can obtain an understanding towards what scholarships were available to assist student's financial problems. The tuition Ross Allen had to pay for the DeLand Academy was a total of \$85 which included dormitory costs, while the tuition for the university was approximately \$150 (8). Scholarships provided included \$75 given per year to endorsed candidates for the ministry as well as thirty positions given to boys and girls to earn money towards their tuition by working as janitors, laboratory and library assistants, mail carriers, and booksellers (8). The Allen family decided to move back to Ohio where they could recoup their

fortunes but the question that remained was if Ross would leave what seemed as a paradise to a young naturalist or move back to Ohio with his family.

Hesitantly, Ross returned with his family to Ohio where he remained for only ten days (1). Going back to Ohio caused Ross to realize that Florida was the place he felt most at home and where he could pursue his passion for nature. Returning back to Florida alone, Ross, now 21, was faced with finding a place where he could start work with his reptiles and taxidermy projects (1). Ross located a barn situated on a large piece of land that would be able to sustain both Ross and his taxidermy studio. Fortunately, the lot was enclosed by a fence allowing Ross to store his alligator pens and snake cages (1). Ross's yard soon began to overflow with "bizarre" creatures that attracted the attention of visitors throughout Central Florida. Ross's reputation was also starting to become known by making newspaper headlines and providing specimens for educational use at the University of Florida and other institutions (1). Hylander reports that the visitors became such a nuisance to Ross that he decided to charge an admission fee in hopes that this would discourage them. To his surprise, the admission fee had no effect on the visitors as they continued to travel to his yard to get a glimpse of the reptiles he had on display (1).

It wasn't long before an incident occurred that would mark the start to Ross's new found fame. Ross's collection had grown to over sixty alligators with lengths ranging from two to four feet (1). What he thought was a strong and sturdy fence around the property was mistaken as the reptiles managed to escape from their enclosure and make their way to freedom via the "highways and byways of Winter Haven" (1). The Winter Haven community soon came into contact with slithering dark figures wriggling their way throughout the city. Although the incident was harmless, it resulted in the city officials presenting Ross with a predicament. He would have to partake in a different business or take his reptiles and locate elsewhere (1). In an

effort to not stray away from his passion, he set out in search for a Florida location where he could build a reptile institute that would allow for educational and scientific purposes. Ross's ideal location was a place that was, "accessible to good hunting and collecting areas, near some natural wilderness preserve, and near a main highway" (1).

Coincidentally, Ross's friend Newton Perry lived in Silver Springs; a small community east of Ocala. At the time Silver Springs was rural in its development but close in proximity to the University of Florida's zoology department and was home to a pond-sized natural swimming pool filled with crystal-clear water that attracted many visitors (1). It was then decided that Silver Springs served as the perfect location for Ross to pursue his dream of a reptile institute. Over the course of several years, Ross's collection of live alligators and snakes grew as he traveled to the Everglades and foreign countries such as Cuba (1). By the 1930s Ross's dream of a reptile institute became a reality as the Ross Allen Reptile Institute was founded and merged with Silver Springs (1). The institute not only provided its audiences with entertainment of live reptiles, but the institute also contributed to the medical world by milking rattlesnakes for their venom to produce antivenin. An article appearing in the Stetson Collegiate on April 21, 1937 reports a snake fighting show performed by Ross at the Reptile Institute in which many Stetson students had attended (13). Pictures from the duPont- Ball library archives illustrate visitors to the Institute with wide open eyes as they look over arena walls to watch Ross battle deadly snakes before their eyes (14). A pamphlet from the archives illustrates the Reptile Institute's welcome center as well as gives the times the institute was open and the souvenirs available for visitors to purchase (15). Due to the fame Ross's institute was bringing to Stetson, the council at Stetson decided to bestow upon Ross an Honorary Diploma.

As the 1970s approached with the unveiling of a new Central Florida attraction, Walt Disney World, visitor attendance to Silver Springs began to decline (1). Ross Allen hoped to counter-act the opening of Disney World with a new attraction to be called Alligator Town. It would be located in Lake City and feature underwater alligator wrestling, rattlesnake shows, waterslides, and rides (1). Alligator Town was to open in June 1981 but Ross fell ill and later died at Shands Hospital in Gainesville on May 17, 1981. He was 73 years old (16).

Although Ross only attended Stetson for a semester, the university served as a mediator in Ross's transition from high-school to the real world. Stetson provided Ross with countless resources to further his education as well as the location of Stetson providing Ross with an environment in which he could pursue his passion. As Stetson today dares its student's to be significant, the same motto applies to the 1920s as his teacher's encouraged Ross to dare into the wilderness; resulting in his significant contributions to science and Florida's natural history. Let us hope that the archives of his legacy convey a story that inspires many other amateur scientists to interact with nature, pursue their passions, and create their own lasting legacy.

Works Cited

1. Hylander, C.J. *Adventures with Reptiles: The Story of Ross Allen*. New York, NY: Julin Messner Inc., 1962. 23-40. Print.
2. Leonard, Bob. "The Great Florida Land Boom." . Florida History, n.d. Web. 31 Aug. 2011. <<http://floridahistory.org/landboom.htm>>.
3. "Gould Insurance Advertisement." *Stetson Collegiate* [DeLand] 20 Oct. 1925, Volume 34, Number 5. Print. duPont-Ball Library Archives.
4. "Deleon Springs Advertisement." *Stetson Collegiate* [DeLand] 2 Oct. 1925, Volume 34 , Number 3 . Print. duPont-Ball Library Archives.
5. "Stetson University Advertisement." *Stetson Collegiate* [DeLand] 17, March 1925. Volume 33, Number 23. Print. duPont-Ball Library Archives
6. "Date of Entry to Academy" John B. University General Registrar. [DeLand] 1920-1929. Print. duPont-Ball Library Archives.
7. Van Alen, Charles, dir. *Stetson University Its Early Years 1883-*. Perf. Bill Dreggors. West Volusia Historical Society, Inc., 1999. Film.
8. "Course Descriptions, Admission Requirements, Scholarships" John B. Stetson University Bulletin 1925-1926. Vol. XXV No.4. 4, April 1926. Print. duPont-Ball Library Archives.
9. "Class Schedule and Grades" John B. Stetson University Gradebook 1923-1926. Print. duPont-Ball Library Archives.
10. Hall , Maggi. *Stetson University*. Charleston, Chicago, Portsmouth, San Francisco: Arcadia Publishing, 2005. 41-43. Print.
11. "DeLand Directory" *Stetson Collegiate* [DeLand] 24, March 1925. Volume 33, Number 24. Print. duPont-Ball Library Archives.
12. "DeLand Map" DeLand Chamber of Commerce. Valentine Engineering Co., Volusia County. 1927. Print. duPont-Ball Library Archives.
13. "Snake Fight Fools Eager Onlookers" *Stetson Reporter* [DeLand] 21, April 1937. No. 28. Print. duPont-Ball Library Archives.
14. "Ross Allen Reptile Institute" Jay Mechling. Photo # 3791-11. Print. duPont-Ball Library Archives.

15. "Reptile Institute Welcome Center Promotional Card" Jay Mechling. Memorabilia no. 2495. Print. duPont-Ball Library Archives.
16. "Ross Allen Obituary" *Ocala Star Banner*. 19, May 1981. Web.
<http://news.google.com/newspapers?nid=1356&dat=19810519&id=A28xAAAIBAJ&sjid=IgYEAAAIBAJ&pg=4102,1819957>