

Fessin' up: Springfield Man Says he Set Cobras Loose on Unsuspecting Town in '53

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At long last—an answer to the most baffling and bizarre riddle in Springfield history:

How did deadly cobras come to slither through a center-city neighborhood in the summer of 1953?

For almost three months, Springfieldians were terrified at the prospect of encountering the poisonous snakes as one after another—at least 11 in all—were discovered lurking in yards, garages, and beneath homes.

And for almost 35 years since, old-timers have wondered how the reptiles, which are native to Asia, wound up on the loose in the Ozarks.

Part of the puzzle never has been much of a mystery: Although the owner vehemently denied it publicly, few ever doubted that a pet store at 1421 St. Louis Street figured into the plot.

However, the big question remained: How were such dangerous serpents set free? Surely no rational person would purposely release reptiles whose bites kill hundreds of people annually in India. Could a mischievous monkey have opened a cage? Or did the snakes slip out of a faulty container?

Now, a Springfield man, revealing a secret he's guarded since he was 14 years old, says the spectacular snake scare grew out of a childish prank.

"I'm the one that done it," confesses Carl Barnett, confirming that he opened a crate of snakes in the back yard of the St. Louis Street pet shop.

"I didn't do it to harm no one. I was only trying to get even after I'd been gypped in a tropical fish deal.

"I didn't know what kind of snakes they were," Barnett emphasizes, "or I never would have let them go."

Barnett is a concrete finisher, welder and mechanic. He lives at 1410 E. McGee St., a stone's throw from the house at 1640 E. Cherokee St. where he lived with his family in 1953 and where his mother, Lucille, still resides.

Quick to welcome a visitor into his home with a friendly handshake and easy smile, Barnett nevertheless is wary about sharing his story. He agreed to discuss the incident with a News-Leader reporter only after a pal convinced him that the community is owed an explanation—and only after an attorney assured that criminal charges are unlikely to be filed 35 years after the fact.

"I never told a soul about being the one who let loose the cobras until about five or six years ago when I admitted it to a friend," says Barnett. Even his mom will be learning of her son's misadventure for the first time by reading this newspaper.

"I've never been so scared in my life once I realize what I'd caused. For

years I was afraid they'd figure out it had been me, and off I'd go to jail. It definitely is the biggest thing I ever was involved in in my life."

It was a big thing for Springfield, too. And it made headlines around the world.

The city and surrounding Ozarks have been in the spotlight several times in recent years. However, the newsworthy events—religion scandals, tragic murders, manhunts and neo-nazi nonsense—while unusual, are not unique.

This side of the planet

No other city in America—indeed, no other community on this side of the planet—ever has been terrorized by an invasion of cobras.

The saga began on August 15, 1953, a Saturday, about supertime.

Roland Parrish was working in his yard at 1420 E. Olive St. when he spotted a snake in the grass. Parrish was not alarmed at the mere sight of a snake...but this one was different.

When Parrish approached the reptile, it stood its ground and raised its head. Parrish watched in horrified fascination as the snake spread a delicate hood about its head and lunged as if to strike.

Parrish struck first, with his garden hoe, and dispatched the snake.

No cause for alarm. Yet.

One week later, Parrish's across-the-street neighbor, Wesley Rose, heard his bulldog barking. Rose looked outside to see what had upset his Sally. He saw the dog wrestling with the snake in the shrubbery.

"When I saw what kind of snake it was," Rose later told reporters, "I knocked her (the dog) off it and tied her up, and my wife brought the hoe.

He (the cobra) reared up like he wanted to fight, and I hit him in the back and paralyzed him. Then we pulled him out and killed him."

The strange appearance and behaviour of the snake, with its distinctive hooded head, led Rose to summon police, who took the carcass to headquarters where it was inspected.

The verdict: *Naja naja*, a hooded cobra, native to southern Asia, carrying venom capable of killing an adult human.

Suspicion immediately fell upon the Mowrer Animal Company, located about a block away from the Parrish and Rose homes. The shop had been in operation for about two years.

The proprietor, Reo Mowrer, admitted he kept cobras at the shop but denied any had escaped.

All was quiet for another eight days. Then Ralph Moore found a snake—positively identified as a cobra—in his yard at 1410 E. Trafficway, two blocks from the Mowrer shop. Again, a hoe was used to slay the serpent.

That same night, Willis Murdaugh caught a glimpse of a snake in the headlights of his car as he drove in his neighborhood. He backed up his car to get a closer look at the snake and was confronted with a swaying, hooded head. Murdaugh thrashed the snake with a jack handle and ran over it several times with his car.

Another week passed, amid growing public clamor over the alarming appearances.

Then in early September more snakes were spotted, and panic threatened.

Mrs. Howard McCoy was warned by her daughter that a snake had been seen gliding into the garage at their home at 1420 E. Olive St. Mrs. McCoy grabbed—what else?—a hoe—and entered the garage. The cobra lay coiled in the corner. But it proved no match for Mrs. McCoy and her hoe.

Not long after, neighbors saw another cobra in weeds near Mowrer's shop. Before police arrived, Mowrer caught the reptile.

Later that day, across the street from Mowrer's shop, L.H. Stockton spotted a snake emerging from his garden. Stockton tossed a large rock at the approaching reptile but failed to halt it. He watched in horror as the 4-foot-long snake made its way through an opening in the foundation of the house and disappeared.

Police were summoned, led by Chief Frank Pike toting a 10-foot pole with a rope noose he'd designed as a "snake-catcher." Careful probes under the house failed to snare the snake. Stockton and his landlord readily gave officers permission to bombard the crawlspace with tear gas.

Tear gas flushes cobra

A gas grenade was set off beneath the house, and out came the cobra. Officer Jack Strobe was poised with a shotgun aimed at the hole in the

foundation. But when he attempted to fire at the escaping snake, the weapon jammed.

Strobe grabbed the pistol from his holster and fired six times as the cobra attempted to retreat beneath the house again. Five slugs thudded into the snake's body, but it still managed to raise its hooded head, giving Chief Pike a chance to loop his pole-mounted rope around its neck.

In the end, a trusty hoe again was used to finish the job.

By this time, the entire town was in an uproar.

City health director Del Caywood ordered Mowrer to move his stock out of the city.

There was hope that the seige of snakes was over. It wasn't.

H.K. Patton saw a snake on Chestnut Street near National Avenue.

"I didn't know what kind of snake it was at first, but I aimed my car at it anyway," Patton said. "I wasn't sure I ran over it the first time, so I backed up and tried again. Then the thing reared up about a foot, spread its hood and struck at the car."

Patrons from the nearby Twilight Inn helped trap the reptile and police officers crushed its head with a large rock—presumably because no hoe was handy.

As September waned, the volume of public outcry grew even louder. Caywood ordered anti-venom shipped as a precaution against a bite.

On Oct. 1, Dan Funkhouser found a cobra outside his plumbing and heating firm at 1221 St. Louis St. With the help of employee Hardy

Teague—and, of course, a hoe—the snake was subdued.

Snake charmer on wheels

Caywood commandeered a truck equipped with a portable public address system and cruised the neighborhood while a record of “Indian snake-charming music” blared from the truck’s roof mounted loudspeakers.

Some snickered at the ploy—but after about 45 minutes of the ear-splitting concert, another snake was spotted and killed near Reynolds Manufacturing Company, 600 N. Prospect Ave.

The 11th and officially confirmed confrontation with a cobra occurred Oct. 25 in the 1400 block of East Olive Street. That snake, captured alive, was put in a glass display cage at Dickerson Park Zoo but died two months later.

All the while Mowrer insisted the snakes didn’t escape from his shop.

However, his relocated operation outside the city limits didn’t last long after it was reported that some rattlesnakes had gotten loose there. Douglas Greene, then Greene County Prosecutor, sent Mowrer packing for Florida.

In preparing the 1973 recounting for the News-Leader, I tracked Mowrer to his original hometown of Unionville in northeast Missouri.

I asked him if he was sticking with his steadfast denial that the cobras had come from his shop.

He paused, then answered slowly and carefully: “There is a man still

alive who might have been responsible, but I couldn’t mention his name. I think he’s working for a fire department now, somewhere down in Florida...”

Mowrer died not long after that interview, and any chance of an explanation seemed to die with him.

Until Carl Barnett stepped forth.

Setting the story straight

The cobra saga was reprised in the May issue of Springfield! Magazine. A friend in whom Barnett had confided his secret convinced Carl to set the story straight.

It is a tale of an enterprising young businessman who didn’t know quite how to react to a deal gone sour...

Carl Barnett learned early to be resourceful. He earned movie and candy bar money by redeeming empty bottles collected from alongside the road leading to Galloway and the then-popular Half-a-Hill club.

As a student at Jarrett Junior High School, a friend introduced him to something new on which to spend his hard-earned money—tropical fish, purchased from the tanks at Newberry’s five and dime on the public square.

“After a while I got tired of the goldfish and other common little fish they had at Newberry’s, and another guy told me that you could get some more exotic fish at this pet shop on St. Louis Street,” Barnett recalls. “That was Mowrer’s place.”

By the summer of ’53, Barnett was a regular customer. And eventually

the youngster learned that Mowrer kept more than just the fish and birds in the front room.

“There was a 20-foot python that lived in a bathtub. And all sorts of other wild stuff in the back rooms and the back yard and garage.”

Barnett had an interest in snakes. He’d lived until age 5 in some “pretty snakey country” in Barry County and learned early how to deal with creepy-crawly critters.

When the family moved to what was the southeast edge of Springfield in the late 1940s, nearby were fields and swampy sites literally crawling with non-poisonous snakes.

“Then one day old man Mowrer mentioned to me that he’d trade snakes for fish. And I thought to myself, ‘Boy, you’re in seventh heaven now!’ Because snakes were all around, just for the picking up. It sure seemed like easy money to me.”

Enlisting buddies, Barnett began snake-collecting in earnest. The boys didn’t hesitate to pedal their bicycles several miles to scour good hunting grounds. A hill over-looking Fulbright Spring, in extreme northwest Springfield, yielded dozens of especially attractive ring-necked snakes.

“Some kids at school saw those little ringnecks and wanted to buy ‘em. We got a quarter apiece. In one day I made five dollars. This was at a time when my dad (Emerson Barnett) was only making 10 or 15 dollars a day driving a truck. Boy, then I *knew* I was in heaven!”

Barnett continued to deal with Mowrer. He set his sights on a rare

tropical fish, and his squirmy catches finally added up to a trade.

“I brought that fish home with big plans to do some breeding. But it turned belly-up during that first night. So I went back the next day—took the dead fish with me as proof—to complain.”

Exotic fish dies overnight

However, on the hot August day Barnett returned with the dead fish, Mowrer was away from the shop and Barnett found a disagreeable helper on duty.

“He was just ugly about the deal and told me ‘That’s tough, kid—get lost,’” Barnett recalls.

“It really made me mad, so I left. But after I went out the front door, I decided to walk around back to see what new stuff might’ve come in. I used to go back there and check things out every so often. I was just looking.”

One item that caught Barnett’s eye was a wooden crate. Barnett recognized the box as a shipping container for snakes.

There were two trap doors on the crate, indicating to Barnett that the box probably was divided into two compartments. He pressed thumb latches to open one of the doors and looked inside.

“There were some black snakes crawling around in there. I had been in the store a few days earlier and saw Mowrer with some indigo snakes. I figured there were indigos—just harmless snakes.

“And I thought to myself, ‘Well, these aren’t the same snakes I traded for the fish, but they’re probably about equal value. So maybe I’ll just leave this door open, and then we’ll be even.’

“And that’s what I did. Just left that trap door open and got on my bike and rode home.”

Barnett didn’t think much about the deed until days later when “I started hearing that cobras were turning up in people’s yards near Mowrer’s shop. I realized what I’d done, and I was scared to death! Every time someone mentioned the cobras, I just wilted. And as more and more of ‘em turned up, they got mentioned plenty.”

Deed haunts Barnett

Although no more cobras were found after October 25, Barnett’s haunting continued for months.

“People were afraid some (cobras) could have gotten into the quarry at National and Trafficway and might survive the winter there. And then after the scare died down, there were souvenirs everywhere—plates and stuff with cobras on ‘em.

“I couldn’t get away from all those reminders. And all the while I was afraid they would find out it was me that started the whole thing.”

Barnett is most grateful that no one was bitten by the cobras.

“I guess I’m the luckiest one of all,” he says. “What amazes me is that I didn’t reach down into that box and pick up one of them and look him

over. That would’ve been the usual thing for me to do.

“I don’t know why I didn’t mess with them. It sure wasn’t because I knew they were cobras. If I’d known what they were in the first place, or if one had raised up out of that box and made a hood, I would’ve slammed down that lid tight! I had no idea...”

Barnett does have some ideas about the one remaining mystery surrounding the spectacular scare: How many cobras escaped?

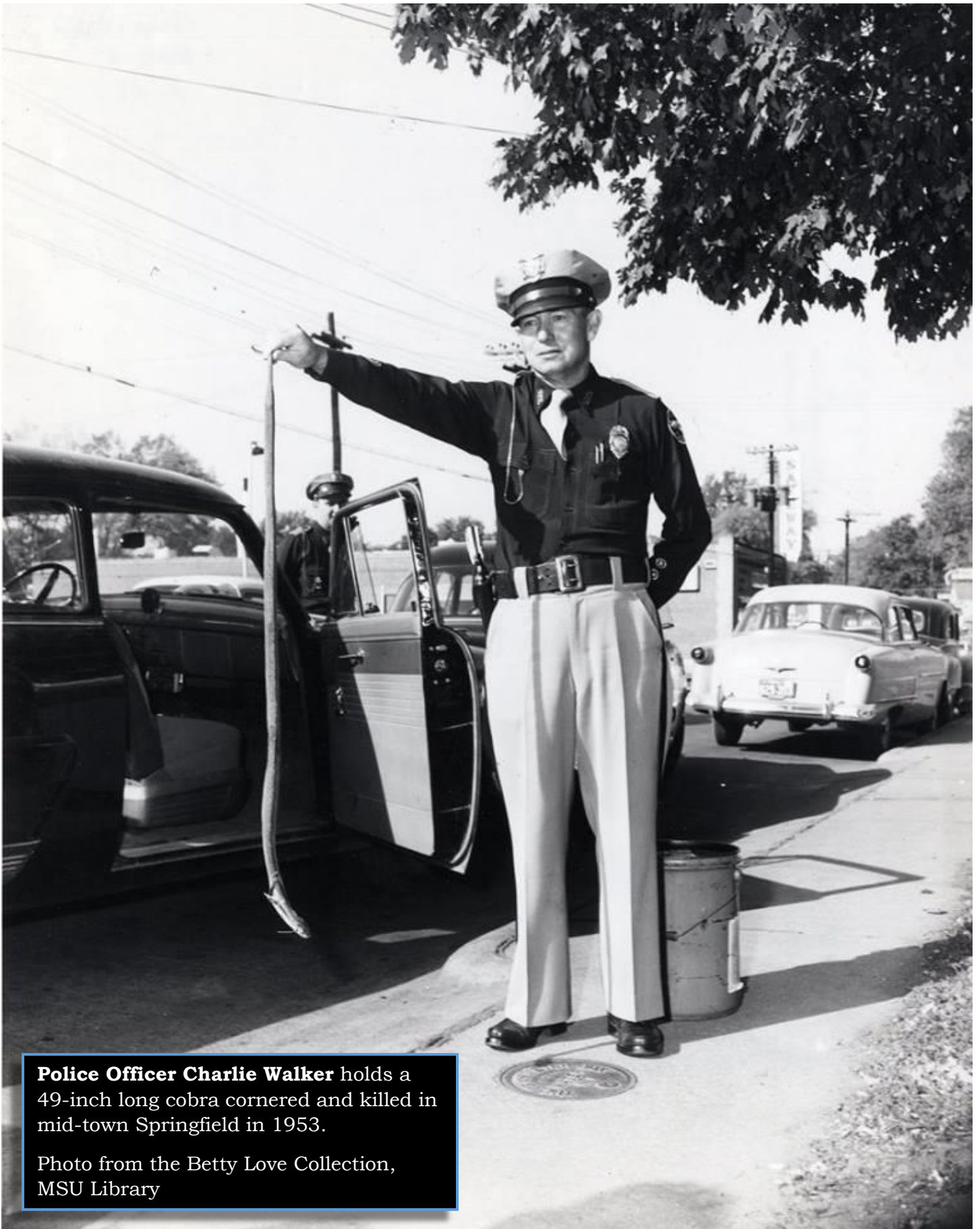
Reports have put the total as high as 100—a notion Barnett quickly rejects.

“I don’t know exactly how many were in that box but, big as those snakes were, there couldn’t have been more than 25 or 30. And if the box was divided into two compartments, maybe less than that got out, because I only opened one of the doors.”

Maybe there were only 11 in the box. Or maybe only 11 crawled out the open door. Or most likely, Mowrer recaptured several on his own.

All Carl Barnett knows is that he was glad when Springfield’s cobra scare subsided.

“I don’t know how people will take it,” he says, “but at least now they know the real story.” ■



Police Officer Charlie Walker holds a 49-inch long cobra cornered and killed in mid-town Springfield in 1953.

Photo from the Betty Love Collection, MSU Library