

**Pointless drivel  
(18 March 2004)**

“It’s a water moccasin!” Jimmy Russell exclaimed as we came upon a large brown and gray snake on the banks of the L’Anguille River in Northeastern Arkansas.

“Naw,” I countered. “Look how small his head is. It’s just a water snake.”

Jimmy and I, and my younger brother, Jennings, who was with us, fancied ourselves expert herpetologists, despite being only in our mid-teens. And in fact we had probably caught more snakes and lizards and salamanders than any three other people in Lee County, Arkansas. We had also been bitten by more reptiles than anyone else in that neck of the woods, but we had never encountered a water moccasin before, and the snake that lay before us lacked the diamond-shaped head which characterized not only water moccasins but rattlesnakes and copperheads as well.

“Naw,” I repeated, with more confidence than I really felt, “he doesn’t have the head to be a water moccasin. See—no poison sacs.”

“It’s a water moccasin all right,” Jimmy said, maneuvering around to get between the snake and the water and pushing at the increasingly agitated reptile with the long thin strip of metal which he had picked up several minutes earlier at the ruins of an old lumber mill which we had played in for years and which was a regular treasure trove of such things as long thin strips of metal.

Now, it goes without saying that there’s a right way and a wrong way to go about catching snakes. The right way involves using specially made snake sticks with loops on the end which enable you to catch the snake without actually laying hands on him, heavy sacks in which to deposit the snake once he is caught, and snake-bite kits, just in case. The wrong way is just to go out and pick them up without any of the above equipment. The wrong way works just fine when you are catching non-poisonous snakes, whose bite is no worse than a cat bite. In fact, the most painful reptile bite I ever experienced was not from a snake but from a very large red-headed skink, whose mamma must have messed around with a bull dog when his daddy wasn’t looking from the way that lizard clamped down on my hand.

Anyway, we had none of that stuff with us on that sunny summer afternoon, and Jimmy was using the metal strip, bent in an “L” shape, to try to immobilize the snake long enough to grab him behind his head, which is the only safe way to hold a snake, if holding a snake is something you are absolutely determined to do.

The problem was that the strip was about an inch wide, from the end that Jimmy held in his hand down to the bent end of the strip which he finally managed to plant firmly across the snake’s neck. Because it was so wide, Jimmy was presented with a choice between grabbing the snake behind the strip, which would leave its head free to turn (and bite), or grabbing the snake in front of the strip, which essentially meant grabbing the snake by his

skull. Jimmy chose the latter.

Now this was a large snake, about three feet long and as big around as Jimmy's forearm, and when Jimmy lifted the snake from the ground the snake writhed mightily. There's a lot of muscle in a three-foot snake, and a good bit of weight as well in one as large as this one, and when it writhed its head shifted in Jimmy's hand and it managed to sink one of its fangs—Jimmy was right; it *was* a water moccasin—in Jimmy's forefinger.

Jimmy immediately dropped the snake, which promptly high-tailed it for the water, leaving the three of us standing there, a mile or so outside of town, without so much as a pocket knife between us.

Our first instinct was to run for help, but after a short distance our minds began to work again and we realized that running was the last thing we should be doing, as it would increase the blood flow, and hence the distribution of poison throughout Jimmy's body. I took off my belt and wrapped it around Jimmy's arm, and we continued on in toward town at an impatient walk.

After a short distance we saw an old car parked at the cemetery just outside of town, and we prevailed on its owner, who was the cemetery caretaker, to drive us the rest of the way in to the doctor's office.

The doctor saw us immediately and proceeded to make a large number of criss-crossed incisions in Jimmy's finger. In retrospect, I wonder if perhaps this was not the doctor's first snake bite, as well as Jimmy's, since the purpose of making incisions at the point of entry is to remove the venom from the site of the bite before it can be carried from the bite site (so to speak) to the rest of the body. A good half hour or more had passed since the bite, and turning Jimmy's finger into hamburger wasn't likely to help one bit (if you will pardon the expression).

Nevertheless, the doctor sliced and diced away at Jimmy's digit, while my brother and I looked on with rapt attention. My recollection is that the doctor's staff telephoned Jimmy's mother who came by the office and picked him up, and my brother and I slinked off to our home and somehow failed to mention the episode to our mother, who, in the way of sensible mothers everywhere, was not particularly keen about her two son playing with snakes (or fire, or firearms, or slingshots, or bows and arrows, or dirt clods, or any of the other things that make being a kid of the male persuasion so much fun).

A week or so passed without comment, and we had just begun to think that we had sneaked this episode past the parents when someone from the adult camp squealed on us and we were subjected to a prolonged lecture from our mother, who didn't know a hog-nosed snake from a piece of garden hose.

But who, come to think of it, had never been bitten by a snake, either.