

= Trapper Nelson =

Vince " Trapper " Nelson (born Vincent Nostokovich or Natulkiewicz around 1909) was an American trapper , hunter , and zoo founder . Though he was born in New Jersey , and lived in Mexico and Texas , he is best known for establishing a homestead @-@ turned @-@ zoo on the shore of the Loxahatchee River in Florida . Filled with exotic and wild animals , his zoo was a popular tourist spot in the 1940s and 1950s , visited by local and national celebrities . Because of this , he became known locally as " Tarzan of the Loxahatchee " .

The zoo was eventually shut down by State health inspectors in 1960 . After his zoo was closed , Nelson became a hermit and suffered from undiagnosed health problems . In 1968 , he was found dead from a gunshot wound in his cabin by a friend . His death was ruled a suicide . Nelson 's campsite is now known as the Trapper Nelson Zoo Historic District in Jonathan Dickinson State Park , Hobe Sound , Florida .

= = Early life = =

Trapper Nelson was born Vincent Nostokovich (or Natulkiewicz) to Polish immigrant parents in Trenton , New Jersey , in 1908 or 1909 . As a boy , to earn money he began trapping animals such as muskrats in the marshes of New Jersey . His parents did not speak English , so Nelson would often assist them in translating to make sure they were not taken advantage of . However , when his mother died and his father remarried , Nelson ran away from home , heading west .

Hopping freight trains , Nelson first ended up in Colorado , then eventually in Mexico . While there , he was arrested by the Federales under suspicion of gunrunning . He spent time in a Mexican jail and was later released . Nelson later claimed his release was because he " wrecked their food budget . "

After his release Nelson headed back east with 10 cents to his name . He made money for food by gambling with other road bums until he made it to southern Florida , where he , his step brother Charles Nelson and friend John Dykas set up camp .

= = Settlement on the Loxahatchee = =

Nelson and his partners settled on the beach by the Jupiter Inlet in Palm Beach County , Florida , in the late 1920s . Bessie DuBois , wife of John DuBois , recalled seeing him for the first time in 1927 or 1928 . The DuBoises owned a restaurant that Nelson would frequent , and Bessie made note of his eccentric eating habits : " He would order a pie ? not a piece of pie , mind you , but a pie ? and he 'd eat the whole thing right in front of me . " He ate ice cream by the half @-@ gallon , and there were stories that he once ate 18 eggs for breakfast .

Things did not stay peaceful for long . On December 17 , 1931 , Charles Nelson shot partner John Dykas in the back , killing him . Trapper Nelson , angered by his step @-@ brother 's actions , testified against him at the trial for Dykas ' murder . Charles was given a 20 @-@ year sentence at Raiford Prison . Disillusioned with civilization , Nelson withdrew from the beach , settling deep in the woods on the Loxahatchee River that same December . Using what little money he had and money borrowed from his sister , he bought 800 acres .

Physically imposing at 6 ' 4 " and 240 pounds , he lived by trapping , hunting , and fishing in what was then wild country . He made money by selling the furs of the animals he trapped , and ate the meat , starting rumors that he ate everything from opossums to stray house cats . He acquired extensive land holdings , bidding on tax auctions during the Great Depression . He would on occasion bid against Judge C. E. Chillingworth , the judge who had handed down his step @-@ brother 's sentence , and the two eventually became friends . When Chillingworth was murdered in the 1950s , Charles Nelson was briefly considered a suspect .

Trapping could only bring Nelson income seasonally , and as south Florida became a popular tourist destination , he came up with a new way to earn money . He eventually developed a zoo on his property in the 1930s , calling it " Trapper Nelson 's Zoo and Jungle Gardens " . His camp and

zoo became popular tourist attractions . Tours along the river from West Palm Beach would stop there for lunch and stretch breaks , and Nelson shared the profits with the boat captains . Locally prominent people and celebrities alike visited , including boxing champion Gene Tunney and actor Gary Cooper , to see his animals , watch Nelson wrestle alligators , and buy souvenirs .

With his new fame came notoriety . He was known locally as the " Tarzan of the Loxahatchee " , and cared for the locals ' exotic pets . He would trap troublesome wild animals , and provided others for parties and events . Rumors were started about his handsomeness , his eating habits (Bessie DuBois denied he ate raw possum) , and his romantic exploits . It was told that he courted heiresses and countesses from wealthy Palm Beach , and that one conquest was a direct descendant of President James Monroe .

Nelson finally married in 1940 in an attempt to avoid the draft for World War II . His plan failed and he was drafted anyway . He joined the Military Police in Texas , but while training , he tore a muscle in his leg and was transferred to Camp Murphy , which was very close to his land .

= = Decline = =

Upon his return to the Loxahatchee , Nelson discovered that his wife had a new lover . He divorced his wife , and after that Nelson bought cars for the women he wooed , paying for them in installments to ensure they would stay for at least a while .

Focusing again on his zoo , he found that property values were skyrocketing . Nelson got a subscription to the Wall Street Journal and added more and more land to his sprawling camp . Shortly after he began his forays into real estate , a health inspector declared his zoo unhygienic and demanded he install lavatories . Nelson did , but the Health Department found them " unsatisfactory " , and in 1960 he was forced to close his zoo . With no income , the taxes on the land became too much for him , and he ended up borrowing \$ 100 @, @ 000 (\$ 800 @, @ 000 in today 's dollars) to pay them .

Nelson already had a deep @-@ seated mistrust of the government , and the closing of his zoo was , to him , enough to confirm his paranoia . He became more and more closed off . He began to dam the river leading to his camp to keep boats away , and installed fences and padlocks to discourage land travelers . He put up signs around his land reading " Danger : Land Mines " . As added discouragement , he kept a 12 @-@ gauge shotgun with him at all times .

He began to develop severe stomach pains , refused to see a doctor . He distrusted them because his brother @-@ in @-@ law had died after having a pacemaker installed . It was speculated among friends that the pains were from cancer , but they could have been an acid condition .

By the 1960s Nelson had become so reclusive that he would not let even trusted friends visit him without first sending a postcard to ask his permission . He ventured into town once a week to check his mail at the post office , and would sometimes buy steaks , but for the most part he remained holed @-@ up in his cabin . Years later , his nephew recalled his uncle 's change in personality : " During the last 10 years , his eyes seemed to lose their sparkle . He became a lonely man , and a rather sick one . "

= = Death = =

In July 1968 , Nelson failed to appear for a planned meeting with an old friend . John DuBois , at whose house the meeting was supposed to take place , became worried and drove to Nelson 's camp . When he surveyed the campsite , everything appeared to be in order , until he got to Nelson 's chickee .

Nelson was found dead in his cabin from a shotgun blast to his stomach on July 30 , 1968 . The Coroner 's Office ruled it a suicide , and the Martin County Sheriff 's Office deemed it a " pretty clear @-@ cut case " . However , many Florida locals had their doubts . " If it were [sic] a suicide , why did [n 't] he do a head shot instead of a chest shot ? " asked Bessie DuBois . The theory was that he stuck the shotgun in the ground , leaned over and pulled the trigger , even though it would have taken considerable effort and flexibility on Nelson 's part .

It was undeniable that Nelson had enemies . Floridian trappers envied his skill and viewed him as an outsider because he was from New Jersey . The State wanted to develop his land into condominiums and golf courses . Shortly before his death , a man who repaired one of Nelson 's jeeps found out he was sick and had not seen a doctor in six months . The man took him to a doctor who prescribed him painkillers . A neighbor , and the last man to see Nelson alive , speculated : " I guess it would be possible for someone to sneak up on him . Ordinarily it would be impossible ... but if he were doped up , well that would be different . "

Some friends considered suicide a possibility , however . His stomach pains may have taken a substantial part in a decision to end his life . An executor of Nelson 's will said he had told his sister that he would " rather die than be an invalid . "

= = Legacy = =

A few months after Nelson 's death , the state traded land for Nelson 's estate , which became part of Jonathan Dickinson State Park . The site is now known as the Trapper Nelson Zoo Historic District . After the land was converted to a park , but still unopen to the public , the camp was often vandalized . One of Nelson 's tool sheds was burned down ; the arsonist attempted to burn other buildings but was unsuccessful .

In April 1984 , park rangers discovered Nelson 's " treasure " : a hiding place in his chimney held 5 @, @ 005 coins , totaling \$ 1 @, @ 829 @. @ 46 . The coins ranged in date from the 1890s to the 1960s . A thorough search of the camp was conducted before revealing the find to the public , but nothing more was found .

The camp still stands today , with his cabin , a guest cabin , a chickee shelter , docks , a boathouse , and assorted cages from his zoo . There are also fruit trees that he planted , including surinam cherry , Java plum and wild almond .