

Would you pet a rattlesnake?



While many of us fear reptiles (especially snakes) and would just as soon not be too close to bugs either, Grace Olive Wiley spent her career working with both. She became famous for her ability to pet the most poisonous reptiles like you and I would pet our cat or dog. Often referred to as a 'snake charmer', Wiley, a herpetologist, denied the appellation in a Mar. 6, 1939 LA Times story. "I am not a snake charmer. My interest is purely scientific." She explained that "The only reason people feel upset about snakes and lizards is that they do not know the real facts about them."

A Kansan by birth, Wiley, educated at the University of Kansas in entomology, started her career as a field collector for the University of Kansas Museum of Natural History. She started collecting snakes as a hobby before switching her focus to herpetology. Wiley was curator of the Museum of Natural History at the Minneapolis, Minnesota Public Library for thirteen years.

The library had a

"...museum with a collection of over 300 living reptiles, frogs, fish, birds with mended wings, bats and other creatures. Classes from the schools of the city and other cities and towns are regular visitors. Of course, children are kept away from dangerous or wild creatures, but they see and hear what kindness will do, and how friendly wild creatures really become if one treats them wisely and understandingly." --The Milepost of Ames, Iowa when Wiley lectured there.

Wiley and her mother, Mary Koontz Grough, established residence (and her first Long Beach home zoo) at 609 W. First Street, after arriving in 1937 with the back of her car filled with "snakes, [many of them] poisonous, lizards of assorted sizes, a tarantula and a two-headed turtle." Quoting from "Grace Wiley and her Animals," by Vera Williams, published in Los Fierros de Los Cerritos (June 1976):

"The first the public knew about her strange menage was when a terrified neighbor telephoned police: "There's a woman on the lawn of a house with a snake 30 feet long!" Police, newspaper reporters and photographers arrived simultaneously. Mrs. Wiley in a white dress, her long brown hair brushed into a bun at the nape of her neck sat peacefully on the lawn, a python stretched luxuriously in the sun beside her. His skin shone with iridescent blues, greens, a dash of red. "Romeo isn't 30 feet long," Grace Wiley explained patiently. "He's only 12 feet but he is growing. There's no danger. He will stay beside me." The law was adamant. Romeo must go inside. "Very well," Grace sighed. "But will you help me please? He doesn't

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want to go in yet." Grace took his head, police, newspaper reporters and photographers picked up four yards of squirming Romeo, carried him upstairs and stuffed him back in his cage.

That was Long Beach's introduction to Mrs. Wiley, a most remarkable person in the lives of those who knew her. The association with its great warmth and respect, lasted 14 years until she died from a cobra bite in July 1948 insisting that the bite was a tragic accident, the scared young cobra not to blame."

Wiley moved to North Long Beach between June 1939 and February 1944 when she located at 34 East Market. News reports of the day, included stories about her ability to "tame" cobras and other poisonous reptiles through kindness, gentle handling and a soft voice. Wiley was quoted as saying that all of her "animals" have learned to trust her as a friend. So, "why bite a friend?"

Several of Wiley's snakes appeared in movies that have familiar titles. King and Queen, her cobras, appeared in "Trade Winds" with Fredric March and Joan Bennett and in "The Jungle Book" with Sabu. Rocky, a 10-foot long Indian python was seen crawling along a limb in a 1945 Tarzan movie produced by RKO. Wiley appeared as a snake charmer (presumably with one of her cobras) in "Moon Over Burma" starring Dorothy Lamour.

With others, Wiley incorporated the Long Beach Zoological Society for the purpose of the "scientific study of the life and habits, protection and preservation of animal life, especially wild life." Wiley apparently intended her collection to be the nucleus of a museum for the society. A reporter for the Long Beach Argus summed up a visit to Wiley by saying, "I left the place with the opinion that North Long Beach possessed one of the Wonders of the World."



According to Vera Williams, "visitors flocked to see them [reptiles]. Some were adults, some girls, but the zoo had a special attraction for boys, many of them Boy Scouts. C.L. Appling, then Scout executive, fostered natural science lessons close at hand." Williams believed that nationally known herpetologist Grace Wiley had a profound influence on young people. She concluded her article in Los Fierros by saying:

"Life, Time, Newsweek, Associated Press and United Press all ran stories on her death. A dozen sorrowing teenagers accompanied her slim body in its simple casket to the cemetery.

Grace Wiley, they believed had taught them kindness and compassion toward all God's creatures, that even reptiles -- "animals!" -- respond to love."