



Original Freddy Stages Breakout

By Larry Nunn

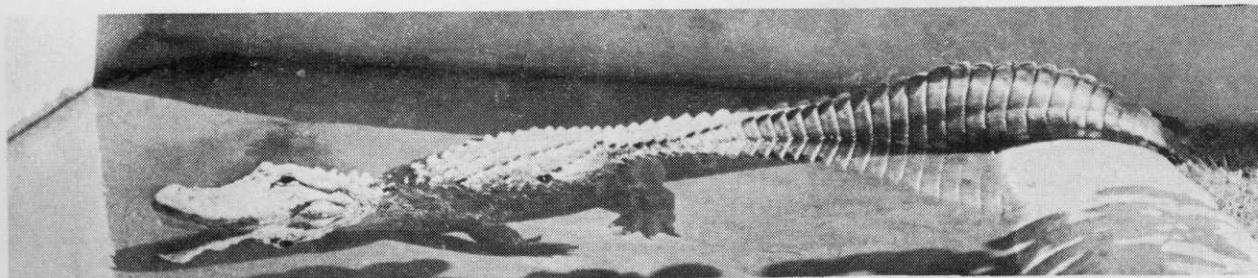
"Don't pay the ransom honey, I've escaped." These are the opening lines of a country-western hit, but recently it applied to "Freddy" the District's original alligator.

For a period of two days we waited expectantly for "Freddy" to return to his original home in Lake Park, but he never showed. For years we have heard about alligators being captured and taken to remote areas in the Everglades, and after a period of time, somehow they find their way back to their original home.

We first met "Freddy" nearly 11 years ago when he burst forth from his egg during the filming of the international award winning film "Alligator." It was love at first sight, and when "Freddy" cuddled up to me I realized that he must become my pet. It took some doing, but finally the Florida Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission issued a permit to raise "Freddy" in captivity.

During the next two years a hectic friendship blossomed between the tiny six-inch alligator and his loving master. During that time he was fed hamburger, fresh minnows obtained from a bait shop, and on Sundays he was treated to marshmallows which he adored. At first "Freddy" was housed in a fish aquarium, but as he grew larger, and larger, a special built aquarium was constructed that provided water to swim in, dry land to sun in and ample food for a dozen alligators. No one told us that alligators hibernate during the winter and when "Freddy"

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HOW "FREDDY" HAS GROWN--Top photo. Paula Guerina holds "Freddy" shortly after he hatched from an egg, a scene that was captured for the District's prize winning film "Alligator!" Center--Two years later Larry Nunn turns his pet over to officials at the Dreher Park Zoo. Bottom photo shows "Freddy" as he looks today after being captured following a two day breakout from his Zoo headquarters.

refused to eat, he was almost force fed, and the extra food added to his size, a process that has continued until the present time when he has passed the 10-foot mark.

"Freddy's" first escape occurred eight years ago during his master's absence from town. The Mrs. was sweeping the swimming pool when she felt something crawling over her foot. She looked down, and to her horror found "Freddy" trying to be friendly. Neighbors were called in to capture the wild two-foot long monster and return him to his home.

Upon my return, I was given an ultimatum that either "Freddy" was going, or my wife was leaving. I gave this some thought and then started looking for a new home for my pet.

Removing him to the Everglades was certainly not the answer, because we had trained him to come upon call for his supper and it was very apparent that if he was taken to a wilderness he had never known, he would walk up to the first hunter and beg to be fed.

A call to the Zoological Society of the Palm Beaches found a positive offer: "We would love to have 'Freddy' in our Dreher Park Zoo." That was the easy part. When we handed "Freddy" to the caretaker he squirmed and fought his new master. Then photographers asked for another picture of me holding him and I took the alligator back into my arms and he actually cuddled up to me, making the parting much more painful.

For eight years "Freddy" has been an apparently happy alligator and has showed off for thousands of visitors. Our visits to "Freddy" started out on a weekly basis, but in recent years this has been reduced to once a year on September 12th where, of course, we always present him with a birthday present of marshmallows and cake.

Then, in early March, "Freddy" apparently said "to heck with it all!" and burrowed his way out of his cage and disappeared.

We would like to think that his reason for the prison breakout was to return to his original home. However, cooler heads indicate that perhaps he heard Mendelsohn's Wedding March and went looking for his bride.

However, Zoo officials did not take the escape lightly and quickly closed the park--and even returned the admission money--and the search was on.

The park remained closed the remainder of that day and all the following day until, as the sun was slipping into the west, the prisoner was located. After carefully taping his mouth shut, the giant creature was returned to his home.

Zoo officials are now busy building "Freddy" a brand new home that they hope will be escape proof, but I still can dream that someday we will hear a knock at the door and find that "Freddy" has returned to his original home and is looking for a marshmallow.

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