

In 1909, Rev. George Hensley delivered a sermon using the last seven verses of the Gospel of Mark as his text. The phrase, “they shall take up serpents” (Verse 18), made such an impression on the preacher, he chased down a rattlesnake, assembled his church members for a meeting, and passed the venomous rattler among them to handle. In the southern Appalachian Mountains, this was the beginning of snake handling as a religious experience. Though many Biblical scholars consider these verses to be a later addition to the earliest gospel, some faithful adherents to the King James Version continue, to this day, the practice of snake handling in their services. It is, for them, a sign of faith.

As far as I know, Rudy Mancke is not related to Rev. Hensley. Rudy and I grew up together. We lived in the Duncan Park neighborhood and attended Spartanburg County public schools together. In our boyhood, Rudy and I were members of the same church. There was no snake handling in our worship services. Rudy enrolled in Wofford College one year after I entered Furman University. We both majored in biology, Rudy to prepare for his remarkable career as a naturalist, and I as part of a vocational search along my path to becoming a seminarian and ordained pastor.

Rudy and I have continued our friendship into adulthood, though we encounter each other less frequently than we would like. Many know Rudy from *NatureScene*, a popular science program that aired for years on South Carolina Public Television. For the past five years, Rudy has been teaching at the University of South Carolina, a professional interest he has had all along. Recently we enjoyed a

# Staying Out All Night With Rudy Mancke

By  
*Kirk H. Neely*

lengthy telephone conversation and remembered a time when, as teen-agers, we stayed out all night long.

Soon after I learned to drive an automobile, Rudy and I decided we were going to stay out all night. I was 14, the legal age for driving in South Carolina in those days. Rudy was one year younger. For two teenage boys to stay out all night may sound scandalous, but it was not as bad as it seems. Our plan was to camp and fish one Friday night at a farm pond near Walnut Grove. My grandfather had built two small fishponds on heavily wooded property near the Tyger River in southern Spartanburg County. The upstream pond, built to prevent silt from filling the other, was filled with snags and dead trees. It was more remote, a little on the wild side. It also provided the better fishing.

Rudy and I laid a fire and fished for a while before dark. We caught several good-sized bream and put them on an old chain stringer in the edge of the water. As darkness surrounded us, we

cooked our supper over the small fire. It was a clear, moonless night in early May. The cool night air was filled with the sounds of bullfrogs, tree frogs, crickets and a pair of owls. In the evening serenade, we heard the discordant note of the chain stringer rattling.

I whispered, “Rudy, something is trying to get our fish.” I speculated that a raccoon might be the thief.

Rudy quietly answered, “No, I don’t think so, but just listen.” We could not see through the dark, but something was definitely messing with our bream. We were very quiet. A few minutes later, we both heard the rattling of the chain again.

When Rudy whispered, “Let’s go,” we both scrambled to our feet. He grabbed his flashlight, and we ran over to the water’s edge to investigate. Caught in the beam of his light was one of the largest snakes I had ever seen. That snake had one of those large bream about halfway down its throat. Rudy got close enough to look at the lips and identify it as a red-bellied green water snake.



*Naturalist Rudy Mancke (left) and pastor/author Kirk H. Neely with a reptilian companion. The lifelong friends grew up near Duncan Park Lake (seen behind them) in Spartanburg.*

I did not care much what kind of snake it was. I was there to fish. As far as I was concerned, the snake, whatever kind it happened to be, was an unwelcome intruder. Not so for Rudy! For him, catching snakes was better than catching fish any time of the day or night.

As we relived the story over the telephone, Rudy informed me, "That night was a history-making event."

I agreed, "It made history in my life."

Ever the teacher, Rudy said, "No, it was a history-making event. Nobody had ever reported a red-bellied green water snake that far north. If you look in *A Field Guide to Amphibians and Reptiles* by Roger Conant in "The Peterson Field Guide Series," you will see that the range for this snake now goes into Spartanburg County. Kirk, that is because we identified the red-bellied green water snake in Spartanburg County as teenagers. Before our discovery that night, everyone thought those particular snakes did not live in areas past Columbia."

"We could have been on *NatureScene*," I replied.

When Rudy saw that big green snake in his flashlight beam, he took charge. "Go get your pillowcase," he commanded. He grabbed the snake behind the neck—I guess I should say behind the head, since a snake is almost all neck—and pulled the bream out of its mouth. The snake did not seem to like, even a little bit, Rudy so rudely grabbing him and stealing his supper. The powerful green serpent threw about three coils around Rudy's arm. I cau-

# Born to Be *in the* Wild

**R**udy Mancke is best known for his field teaching in the *NatureScene* series produced by South Carolina Educational Television. He was the curator of the South Carolina State Museum of Natural History for 10 years. Since 2002, he has been the Distinguished Lecturer in Natural History at the University of South Carolina.

The Spartanburg native received his bachelor of science degree in biology and geology at Wofford College, graduating Phi Beta Kappa. He earned a master of science degree in zoology at the University of South Carolina. He has been awarded honorary doctoral degrees from five South Carolina colleges: Wofford, Winthrop, Coker, Presbyterian and the College of Charleston. He is the founder of SCAN (South Carolina Association of Naturalists). Among his numerous awards is the Order of the Palmetto.—*KHN*

“Oh, no, they’re not getting out. Haven’t you noticed how big those northern-banded water snakes have grown?” The snakes were eating one another.

By early October, just one snake remained, the big green red-bellied water snake, and it was bigger than ever. Before the first day of autumn, Rudy and I took the snake to Duncan Park Lake and let it swim to freedom.

**M**y wife Clare and I had five children, four sons and one daughter. Clare has heard the story many times. She says the best line in the story is, “We could do this all night!” She knows teen-age boys could have done a lot of other things all night long that would have been far more objectionable.

That night was my one and only snake hunting expedition with Rudy Mancke. Before long, Rudy started actively seeking copperheads and rattlesnakes. He has been bitten a time or two. I cannot think of anything more objectionable than that.

Through the years, I have seen many snakes. I have handled a few, all nonpoisonous species. My rule of thumb (my snake-bitten thumb) is to follow the same motto I see posted at highway construction sites: LET ’EM WORK; LET ’EM LIVE. In the great scheme of things, snakes have their own work to do. Let them be.

Rev. George Hensley supposedly was bitten 446 times by the venomous vipers he handled in worship. He finally died after bite 447, at age 75, steadfastly refusing medical treatment. Be careful out there, Rudy! ❖

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*Dr. Kirk H. Neely is senior pastor of Morningside Baptist Church in Spartanburg. His first book of fiction, Comfort and Joy, was published by Hub City Writers Project in October 2006.*

tiously opened the pillowcase, and Rudy dropped the gigantic snake, still writhing in anger, into my pillowcase. Much to my dismay, I stood there holding my pillowcase filled with a huge red-bellied green water snake. Rudy looked at me and exclaimed, “We could do this all night!” That is exactly what we did.

I do not know how many fish we caught that springtime Friday night, but I do know we caught 38 snakes. We filled two pillowcases with them. In addition to the first snake, we caught three northern-banded water snakes, which many people misidentify as water moccasins. That snake very well may be responsible for the old expression “as mean as a snake.” Northern-banded water snakes are ill-tempered creatures.

All the other snakes in our pillowcases the next morning were little queen snakes; not much to look at, but they sure smell bad!

When we returned home right after daylight, my dad was on his way to work. I said, “Dad, let me show you

something.” I opened one of the pillowcases, and a banded water snake thrust itself to the top, biting me on the thumb. I quickly closed the sack of snakes, grimacing in pain.

Dad asked, “What do you have there?”

“Thirty-eight snakes,” I moaned.

He asked, “What are you going to do with them?”

I answered, “We are going to keep them.”

“Not here, you’re not! It would be all right with me, but not with your mother.”

Rudy and I took the snakes to the basement of his home, a short walk down the road and around the bend from my house. Rudy’s saintly parents had grown accustomed to having critters as houseguests. We kept the snakes in a big terrarium with framed hardware cloth secured over the top. We watched those snakes all summer. When I noticed the number of snakes diminishing, I pointed out to my friend, “Rudy, some of the snakes are getting out of the cage.”