

“Bring ‘Em Back Alive”

Frank H. Buck, one of the foremost zoological collectors of the United States, arrived yesterday from San Francisco and at once assumed the duties of his position as director of the San Diego zoo. Under his direction, the splendid zoo here is expected to increase rapidly in size and reputation.

--San Diego Union, June 14, 1923

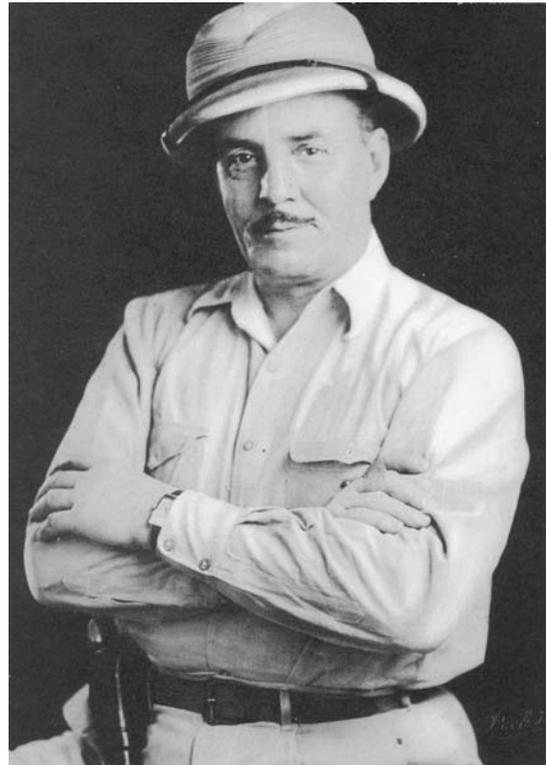
The adventures of Frank ‘Bring ‘Em Back Alive’ Buck captivated millions of people throughout the world in the 1930s and 40s. Celebrated to this day for his exploits as a wild-animal hunter and trader, Buck is less well known for his brief, tumultuous tenure as director of the San Diego Zoo.

Frank Buck was the zoo’s first full-time, salaried director. Signed by the Zoological Society to a three-year contract that paid \$4000 annually, the forty-one year old Buck came to San Diego backed by the strong recommendation of Dr. William T. Hornaday, director of the famed Bronx Zoo.

He started work in June 1923, voicing excitement for his new job to reporters. “We have the best zoo west of Chicago, Buck boasted, “and we are going to make it even bigger and better.” He began with an ambitious building program, constructing new exhibit cages for birds and monkeys, and acquiring new animals for the growing collection.

But his efforts were not appreciated by the board of the Zoological Society and particularly its president and founder of the zoo, Dr. Harry M. Wegeforth. A strong-willed, hands-on president, Wegeforth walked the zoo grounds daily and immediately clashed with the independent-minded Buck. After only three months, the zoo board fired Buck, charging that the man “could not be trusted.”

Buck decided to sue the Zoological Society and Dr. Wegeforth, for breach of contract. Claiming that he had given up his lucrative animal-collecting business to work in San Diego and suffered injury to his reputation, Buck sought damages of \$22,500.



Frank Buck. From *All in a Lifetime* (1941)

In his court deposition Buck cited a litany of grievances, most of them focused upon the actions of Wegeforth. Buck claimed the zoo president had interfered with "practically everything" and had conspired with the board to "belittle and disparage" his efforts as director. He had been fired, Buck believed, after he built a new bird enclosure without personal authorization from Wegeforth.

He also made surprising allegations about Wegeforth. A professional physician, Wegeforth took a strong interest in veterinary medicine and personally monitored the health of the animals. But Buck charged that the doctor had killed a sick tiger by dosing the animal with calomel, and had been responsible for the deaths of 150 snakes that had been force-fed with a sausage stuffer.

Quite a different story emerged in court from the testimony of board member Thomas N. Faulconer, and several others. All witnesses flatly denied Buck's charge that snakes had been killed by force-feeding, and they suggested the sick tiger had died after a suspicious blow to the head.

According to these witnesses, Buck's problems stemmed from his unwillingness to consult with the board on everyday policy. Frequently, he deliberately defied board directives. "The whole character of the man," Wegeforth testified, "was insubordination."

There was more involved than a clash of wills. Wegeforth charged that Buck was incompetent. Business deals with other zoos or animal collectors were mismanaged and undocumented. On one occasion Buck had ordered new nameplates for animal cages and pens. The order had to be returned when it was found that half of the names had been misspelled by Buck.

Wegeforth also cited examples of Buck's failure to recognize disease or properly care for sick animals. He replied to the charge that snakes had died by saying that Buck himself had mistreated the reptiles: "Mr. Buck stuffed down, by the most inhuman way of feeding, snake meat down the throat of a boa constrictor instead of using a more modern method of stomach tube or feeding the meat through a tube."

The final straw was an incident involving the zoo's two Indian elephants: Empress and Queenie. Buck believed that the hides of the elephants, which appeared dry and cracked, would benefit from "oiling," a customary practice that Dr. Wegeforth learned often caused pneumonia or kidney disease.

Despite the president's orders, Buck oiled the elephants. Wegeforth recalled: "they quickly became piteous-looking creatures, their trunks grew flaccid and seemed about a foot longer than usual, and their abdomens almost touched the ground. I was afraid they were doomed."

Fortunately, Empress and Queenie recovered. Frank Buck, however, was sacked.

On Feb. 20, 1924, Superior Court Judge Charles Andrews ruled against the plaintiff Buck and ordered him to pay court costs of \$24. He soon left San Diego and resumed his career as a "zoological collector."

In 1930, Buck became a bestselling author with his book *Bring 'Em Back Alive*. The film documentary that followed made him an international star.

He returned to San Diego in 1943. Lecturing in the Russ auditorium of San Diego High School, the world-famous adventurer recounted his thirty years as a hunter of wild animals. Buck "brought gasps" from the audience as he described his breathtaking struggles in the jungle with

venomous cobras, screaming leopards, and man-eating tigers. His brief misadventures at the San Diego Zoo, twenty years earlier, were long forgotten.

Buck's 1941 autobiography, *All in a Lifetime*, would not mention his lawsuit against the San Diego Zoo. But interestingly, "while acting as temporary director of the San Diego Zoo," he claimed credit for inventing a method for force-feeding snakes—the means he would boast, "by which captive pythons are mainly fed today."

Originally published as "Zoo director hired, then things got wild," by Richard Crawford, in the *San Diego Union-Tribune*, January 23, 2010.