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THE GATOR CHILDREN OF BERRIEN COUNTY



This exaggerated and totally fictitious poster above was a common type "teaser" that brought thousands of carnival-goers into midway tents in the early 1900s to see Berrien County's most well-known celebrities—the "Gator Children."

Last fall, two gentlemen from Brunswick, Georgia came into the office of the Berrien Historical Foundation, asking a very peculiar question, "Had I ever heard of the Gator Children?" They said their father had originally lived in Berrien County and often mentioned the "Gator Children," stating they had alligator features with web feet, alligator skin, and crawled around like alligators.

I responded that I had never heard of them before, and assumed it was an urban legend or such.

It was only a week later that an elderly lady from Berrien County came into the office and asked if there had ever been any articles written about the "Gator Children" of Berrien County.

"You mean there really were children that lived in the county at one time who were known as "Gator Children," I asked surprisingly.

"Oh yes," the lady responded, "My mother used to live just down the road from them, out in West Berrien." She went on to explain that there were two of them, one girl and one boy. She thought their names were Mattie and Bettie, and that they may have been Warrens, or raised by a Warren family.

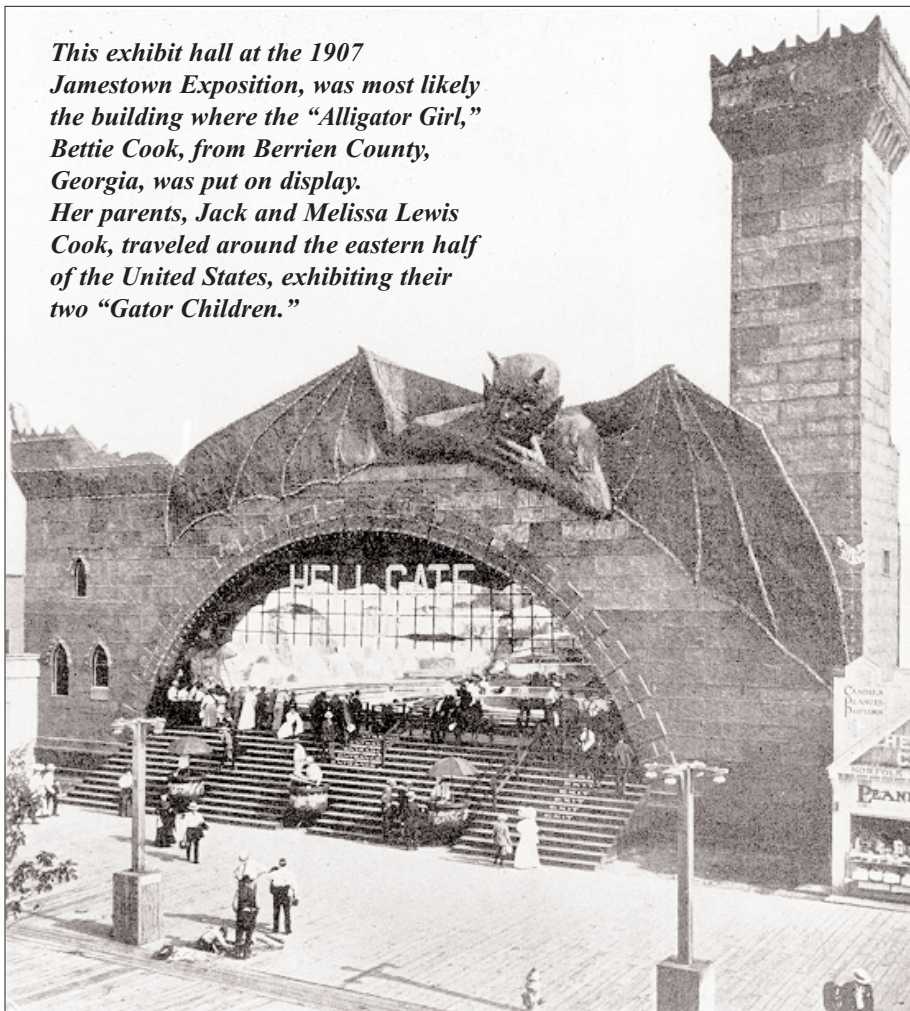
Thus began a very interesting search that led me to a better understanding of the oddities of nature, and how earlier generations responded to these unique children.

The condition these two children were afflicted with is known as ichthyosis, a genetic skin disorder characterized by a dry skin condition which forms large thick scales over most of the body. In severe cases, the condition manifests itself at birth, accompanied by deafness, unusual teeth structure, and lack of skeletal development, which usually limits the mobility to crawling. Unfortunately these two children had a severe syndrome.

My first verification of the existence of the "Gator Children" was an article in the *Nashville Herald* dated December 22, 1905. Therein it states, "Mr. and Mrs. Jack Cook returned Tuesday from Tampa where they have been attending the Tampa Fair and exhibiting their deformed children, known as the "alligator children." They get \$200 per month and expenses, so we have been told. They will leave for another tour about the first of January."

With this verification I was able to

This exhibit hall at the 1907 Jamestown Exposition, was most likely the building where the “Alligator Girl,” Bettie Cook, from Berrien County, Georgia, was put on display. Her parents, Jack and Melissa Lewis Cook, traveled around the eastern half of the United States, exhibiting their two “Gator Children.”



confirm that the “Gator Children” were offspring of Jack Cook. This sent me on a search of the U.S. Census records.

James Jackson Cook was the son of Elijah Cook and Arinda Chandler. In 1882 he married Melissa M. Lewis in Berrien County. The 1900 Census shows Jack and Melissa living in District 1148 of East Berrien, along with their children Bart M. (likely the M stood for Madison), born 1883, Luanna, 1885, Leila, 1887, and Bettie, 1889.

In the 1910 Census, Jack and Melissa were living in Nashville, on Washington Street. The only children living with them were Madison, age 27, name listed as such, Bettie, age 20, and William M. age 11.

In the April 26, 1907 issue of the Nashville Herald it states, “Mrs. Jack Cook and one of her ”alligator children” are in Norfolk, ready for the opening of the big Jamestown Exposition.”

The 1907 Jamestown Exposition was a huge fair, consisting of numerous

buildings that housed displays of entrepreneurship, cultural variety, and other contemporary subjects. One of the most popular exhibit halls was referred to as “Hell Gate” which contained many “oddities of nature.” It is most likely that Mrs. Cook had included Bettie as part of that exhibit.

For whatever reason, Bettie was the child most frequently put on display. In a 1908, *Jacksonville Times* newspaper article titled “Alligator Girl” it states, “One of the most wonderful studies of human anatomy is shown in the Alligator Girl on the

Tony, the Alligator Skin Boy, was one of the most popular side-show exhibits at Coney Island, New York a century ago. His ichthyosis syndrome was not as severe as Madison and Bettie Cook’s condition. There are no known photographs of the “Gator Children” of Berrien County.





Midway and occupying the first tent inside the entrance. She is 18 years old and was born in Berrien County, Georgia. The girl neither talks or walks and her mode of progress is to crawl, like an alligator. The markings of her entire body show the wonderful similarity to the giant reptile accomplished by nature. Two prominent physicians who examined the Alligator Girl yesterday pronounced her the most marvelous of all the curious evolutions of nature.”

Jack and Melissa Cook spent weeks and sometimes months at a time traveling about the eastern half of the United States, following the carnival circuit

A news item in the *Nashville Herald*, May 7, 1909, indicated that, “Mr. and Mrs. Jack Cook with their alligator children, spent Wednesday night in Sparks, on their way to Illinois for an eight months tour.”

And it seems that their tours away from home were quite frequent. Again in the *Nashville Herald*, October 15,

1909, “Mr. and Mrs. Jack Cook, who have been touring the north and east with their alligator girl, have returned home for a stay.”

By 1913, the parents appear to have limited the “feature show” to include only Bettie, the “Alligator Girl.” They were freshening up their travel gear as well.

In the *Nashville Herald*, dated March 7, 1913, it read, “Mr. and Mrs. Jack Cook, who travel with the Barkoot’s Carnival, exhibiting their Alligator Girl, had a new wagon and outfit made. They joined the carnival in Valdosta last week for a season’s run.”

Just how long the Cooks continued to exhibit either of the children is not known, however by 1920, the family was living on Marion Street in Nashville, and the two children Mattie, now 37, and Bettie, now 31. Sometime before 1930, Mrs. Melissa Cook passed away, leaving Jack to care for the

Three of the sons of Elijah and Arinda Cook. Left to right: Frank, Jasper, and Jackson, the father of the “Gator Children.” None appear to have any of the symptoms of the ichthyosis condition, However, four of their siblings were listed by Folks Huxford as “life-long cripples.” Nothing is known of their affliction.

children. In the 1930 Census, Jack Cook, age 66, is a widower, living with his two children, Matt and Bettie, as well as his niece, Arizona Bahara, age 35, also widowed.

Over the course of their lifetime, Jack and Melissa Cook accumulated a number of pieces of property, including several residences. In 1936, the Superior Court, granted Jack full authority over the two-fifth survivorship estate of Madison and Betty Cook.

Eventually, Jack and the two children made their home on property just off the Chaserville Road near the county line in West Berrien.



This simple family plot at the Long Bridge Cemetery in West Berrien is the final resting place for the two of the most noteworthy citizens of Berrien County, the “Gator Children” and their parents. No dates of birth or death are inscribed.

In 1941, Jack Cook deeded his property in West Berrien to his daughter, Luanna Warren, wife of M. D. Warren, Sr. for the sum of love and \$1.00. He probably died shortly thereafter.

Luanna took the “Gator Children” in and cared for her siblings until their deaths. The exact date of the passing of Mattie and Bettie is not known. They were buried in a very simple family plot along with their parents at the Long Bridge Cemetery. Each marker has a plane, one line inscription of each of their names, with no dates.

The parents names are inscribed: James Jack Cook, and Mary Melissa Cook. The children were known by Bettie, Madison, Maddie, Mattie, and Matt, respectively, throughout their lifetime. Their markers are inscribed simply, Betty Cook and Matthew Cook.

However their memory and legacy that remain in this small, South Georgia community will always be remembered with the curiosity that comes from such a mythical name as “The Gator Children of Berrien County.”

—Bryan L. Shaw



Sibling of the “Gator Children,” Luanna Cook Warren at her 95th birthday. She took the adult “children” in after the death of their parents, and cared for them until their passing. Photo is taken from a newspaper article from the Berrien Press in 1980. She died in 1983.



Betty Cook, the Gator Girl. This is the only known photo of Betty Cook, known as the Gator Girl of Berrien County. It pictures her probably about the age of twenty-five or thirty. Though she is posed here sitting up, her mode of travel was reported to being carried or crawling.



BERRIEN HISTORICAL FOUNDATION

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