



Alligators in the Sewers!

BY ROBERT E. BARTHOLOMEW

ON FEBRUARY 10, 1935, A REMARKABLE HEADLINE appeared in the *New York Times*: “Alligator Found in Uptown Sewer.” It was reported that 16 year-old Salvatore Condulucci had been shoveling snow into an open manhole with a group of friends on East 123rd Street, when they peered into the opening and spotted the creature churning in the murky waters. They reportedly grabbed a clothesline, created a noose and lowered it into the hole. After several near misses, Condulucci managed to angle the rope around the gator’s neck and yanked hard, snaring it. The youths pulled the dazed reptile onto the street and clubbed it to death with their shovels. Or so the story goes.

The *Times* reported that the boys brought the gator’s remains to the Lehigh Stove and Repair Shop at 441 East 123rd Street, where it weighed an impressive 125 pounds and measured nearly eight feet in length. As there were no area pet shops, it was hypothesized that the creature may have been a passenger on a steam ship from the Everglades that had fallen overboard. The account states that by 9 o’clock that very night, a Sanitation Department truck pulled up to the store and drove the carcass to

Barren Island where it was incinerated.

Despite many specific details in the report, including names and addresses, the story has never been verified and is almost certainly an urban myth. There is a long history of sewer alligator reports in many US cities dating back to the late 19th century. Not a single case has ever been confirmed. But nowhere is this myth stronger than in The Big Apple. The *Times* article contains several red flags. For instance, it is clear that the anonymous reporter did not observe the creature firsthand, and instead relied on the claims of others. It stretches credulity that no one took a photo of it and that it was promptly incinerated, destroying any potential for confirming evidence.

Since the 1870s stories have circulated in newspapers across the US of alligators making their home in the sewer systems of major cities, especially New York. A typical version of the story holds that tourists from Florida or local carnival goers on Coney Island had purchased a baby gator and brought it home. Before long, these cute babies outgrew their welcome and were flushed down the toi-

Illustration by Anna Maltese

let, only to survive and grow to full size. One of the earliest versions of the story appeared in the *Atlanta Constitution* on August 5, 1873. It stated that a great commotion had been triggered by the discovery of a gator, upwards of 10 feet long, in the heart of the city. "It is said to float at ease in the sewer running from the American Hotel down by the residence of Postmaster Denning. At night it is said his deep bass voice can be heard. . . children shake with terror, for every now and then if one gets out of sight, it is generally believed that his alligatorship has had a good meal."¹

Press accounts of sewer alligators were recorded in Dallas, Texas, and Newark, New Jersey in 1886, in Detroit, Michigan in 1913, and Dayton, Ohio in 1919.² These are just a few of many reports. In 1982, *The New York Times* published an interview with the design chief in the New York City Bureau of Sewers, John T. Flaherty, who observed that each year several people wrote the department to ask about the alligator claims. A Denver woman wanted to know if sewer employees were given guns for protection. A resident of Celoron, New York, wanted Flaherty to settle a disagreement with his coworker as to whether the creatures changed color after being out of the sun for so long. During his interview, Flaherty did admit that there were fierce creatures living under the streets of New York. They were called sewer rats!³

Historian Mark Barber notes that claims of alligators breeding in the sewers of New York are physically impossible as the sex of offspring is determined by the temperature of the nest. Male alligators require a temperature over 93 degrees Fahrenheit. Since the temperature in the sewers is well below this, there would be no male alligators born to reproduce. He suggests that the story continues to flourish due to our "deep fascination and

fear of what might be lurking underneath our cities."⁴ Folklorist Jean-Noel Kapferer concurs, and suggests that sewer alligator tales may be a commentary on modern city life, a reminder that just under the pavement is a world of aggression.⁵

While the origin of the legend is unknown, accounts of pigs living under the streets of London during the 19th century may be a historical precursor, and reflect similar fears of life in the big city.⁶ Toshers, or shoremen, were people who routinely trekked through the London sewers for lost items such as coins, jewelry and scrap metal. In his book, *London Lore*, Steve Roud notes that this group had a vibrant folklore of "black swine" slouching through the sewers in the vicinity of the suburb of Hampstead. According to the story, a young sow accidentally got trapped in the system and reared her young, who in turn reared more and more sewer pigs who flourished by feeding on the garbage.⁷

The legend of sewer alligators in major cities has been further spread through modern popular culture. In his 1963 novel *V*, Thomas Pynchon described two-man alligator patrols hunting the creatures with shotguns. How they got there closely follows the urban legend—they were purchased as souvenirs in Florida and later discarded. The 1980 John Sayles movie *Alligator* stars a monster that emerges from the sewers to terrorize a Midwestern town by feasting on human prey.⁸ But more than any other medium the legend of sewer alligators has been spread by the press, giving legitimacy to the myth despite the absence of supporting evidence. Most people assume that because it appears in print it is likely to be true. In recent years, Finnish folklorist Camilla Ingemark has identified earlier accounts of what she believes to be the same urban legend: stories of octopuses in the ancient Roman sewer system.⁹ **S**

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