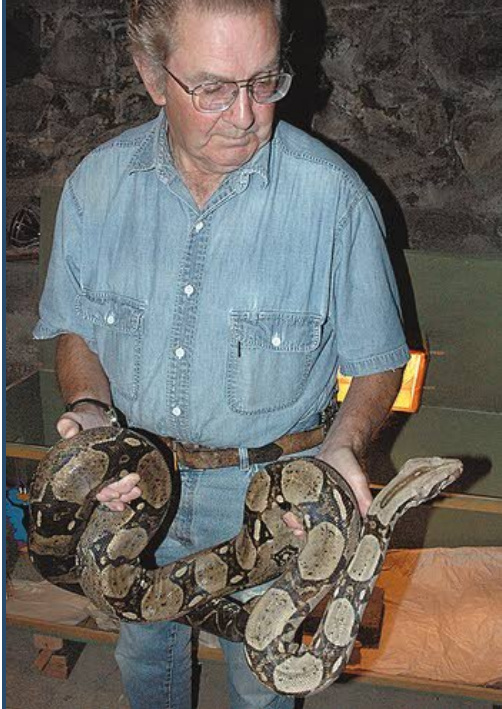


# Snakes find rare friend in Uniontown

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By David Johnson of the Tribune  
**Everyone Has a Story**



Ray McLean and his reptile friend, Bongo....

People featured in this column have been selected randomly from the telephone book.

UNIONTOWN - In the catacomb-like basement of Ray McLean's 105-year-old home, beyond the laundry and cold storage rooms and up against the stone foundation, the snakes are waiting and hungry.

"This is the reptile room," Ray says as a door squeaks open and three warming lights spar with the darkness. "All of these are fed pretty regular."

Bongo, a red-tail boa, Bingo, a ball python, and Lucky, a Texas rat snake, are coiled in their respective aquariums. Their combined length approaches 18 feet of constricting appetites.

Bongo, the biggest, eats live rats. Bingo and Lucky usually dine on live mice. But Ray says he's low on cuisine and must buy more rodents soon.

"I try to feed them once a week." It takes about three weeks, Ray says, for complete digestion.

"About a third of the way down they start digesting. When it comes out, there's just hair and teeth left."

Ray, 68, is a retired Washington State University custodian. He grew up on a farm where snakes, including rattlers, were commonplace. "When we were kids, we found eight or 10 baby rattlesnakes that had just hatched. And the mother wasn't around. But they were mean little devils."

Are they poisonous?

That's the most common question people have about his snakes, Ray says. They're not.

Why do so many people have an aversion to snakes?

That's the question Ray says he's still trying to answer. "I've been trying to find that out, and the people cannot tell me. People who don't understand are mean to snakes."

But not Ray. He's had various kinds of constrictors as pets for about 20 years, finds them to be always fascinating and always gives them the respect they deserve.

"If you let them wrap around your neck, they can constrict and choke you," Ray says. "So you never put a live snake around your neck."

He coaxes Bongo from its aquarium into his arms. The snake, while it can't speak, seems to articulate its appreciation as it slowly glides over and across Ray's forearms. "I had seven or eight when I came here."

Ray and his wife, Melinda Faerber, just celebrated their sixth anniversary. She seldom, if ever, ventures into the reptile room.

"They look slimy, and that's why people think they're slimy," Ray says of his snakes. "But all three of them shed last week and they're so smooth."

On occasion, Ray takes one or more of his snakes to show-and-tell sessions with children, who are more accepting than adults. "The kids just love them." And the snakes, with Ray maintaining close supervision, seem to accept being touched by scores of little hands.

Although, Rays recalls, a big python once took too much of a liking to his hand. "He took my whole hand in his mouth and then wrapped around my arm. When I tried to unwrap him, his tail went around the other arm." Handcuffed by the snake, Ray called for help from his son and daughter, who helped unwrap the snake.

"And then he let go of my hand. I guess he decided I was too big to eat."

Lucky, the rat snake, recently underwent successful surgery at WSU's veterinary hospital for removal of a tumor. "Lucky-to-be-alive" is what Ray calls her now. Bongo also had some surgery and the money spent for both snakes, Ray says, is worth the return he receives from such a hobby.

"Most people don't like my hobby," he concedes.

Recent publicity about snakes threatening and even killing people serves only to heighten the bad reputation of pets like Bongo, Bingo and Lucky, Rays says. Only when people take the time to learn about them, touch them, even hold them, Ray insists, will snakes gain the respect they deserve.

"Come on baby, let's put you back," Ray says as he eases Lucky back into her aquarium. "You never walk away from a cage that's unsecured."

The snakes resume their waiting posture as Ray secures the lids over the aquariums, closes the squeaky door and leaves his hungry serpents behind.

Time for a grocery run.

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