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PEOPLE ON THE WAY UP



Natural-Born Naturalist: Handling a headstrong javelina (also known as a peccary) looks easy when the handler is William H. Woodin, 36, Director of the Arizona-Sonora Desert Museum near Tucson. Woodin has a way with animals. The late explorer Roy Chapman Andrews called him "the most promising young naturalist in the United States." His greatest ambition: "To help people become one with the works of nature, and understand the vital relationships between soil, water, plants, wildlife and people." To this end, Woodin dug a tunnel under the desert, where visitors can see plant-root systems, bats napping in caves, foxes snoozing in their dens, snakes nesting. But Woodin doesn't wait for the public to come to him. He and his associates conduct wildlife shows in Tucson schools and on television, often taking along with them the wild sow at left, "Olivia de Javelina," and her boyfriend, "Gregory Peccary." Woodin, son of an inventor, and grandson of F.D.R.'s first Treasury Secretary, was smitten by herpetology at age six, when he captured a snake which gave birth to fifty-two offspring in one day. At twelve, he charmed the Tucson Rotary Club with a snake talk; during World War II, while driving an ambulance in India and Burma, he kept an eight-foot python as a pet. After the war he earned zoology degrees at the universities of Arizona and California, became curator of reptiles at the Museum of Northern Arizona, in Flagstaff. He offered his services at Arizona-Sonora shortly before its opening in 1952, was put to work carpentering and sweeping—at no salary. Two years later he succeeded co-founder William H. Carr as director. Woodin, his wife and their four sons—he calls them "Woodin Indians"—live in an adobe ranch house, raise bobcats as a hobby, keep a pet rattler. A compulsive snake collector, Woodin often prowls desert roads at night with a flashlight, stick and burlap bag, searching for specimens. Before Mrs. Woodin domesticated him, he kept his favorites in sacks in the living room. "It was a terrible sight," she recalls, "when the sacks wandered around at night."

PHOTOGRAPH BY GARY GLADSTONE