

## *Zagaya Hombre....Sasha Siemel*

by Gene Wensel

“Courage.” Intestinal fortitude.” “Fearlessness.” “Grit.” “Guts.” “Valor.” “Spirit.” “Bravery.” Why are there so many terms for the exact same human quality? In my opinion, all these words pretty much mean the same thing. Why? Because these characteristics are honorable but uncommon to man, yet very easy to understand and define.

If you had to name the most daring type of sport hunting, what would it be? Cape buffalo with a bow and arrow? How about polar bear without a backup gun? Maybe mountain goats on ice covered cliffs or spearfishing for sharks? Sure, a handful of brave or crazy outdoorsmen have done some of the above. Most considered each quest a personal challenge. Some walked away both satisfied and thankful when they luckily pulled off their once-in-a-lifetime goal.

But how about a man who got so jacked up by his own adrenaline rush that he literally made a *career* out of facing death, not once, but *dozens* of times? Like gunfighters or dangerous stunt men who die of old age. Like high tight rope walkers who use no nets. Or the guy who put those pieces of fruit on top of his head so Howard Hill could shoot them off. Were the crowds more impressed with Hill’s skill or the guy with no name?! Each of these type people accept their challenges one at a time and seem to get intoxicated by the adrenaline rush and high risk.

I feel safe to say that most bowhunters have probably never heard the name Sasha Siemel. That surprises and somewhat saddens me, as Alexander “Sasha” Siemel led the sort of adventurous life that only fictional movies and books are made of. But Sasha’s exploits were very real indeed. They were not only unique, but as genuine as a red Brazilian sunrise.

In Brazil, the word jaguar is “tigre.” Sasha Siemel hunted jaguars with a spear. He also took many with his yew longbows. “Tiger-Man”, as he came to be known, became a legend in his own time. He died peacefully at eighty years of age in a small town in Pennsylvania. His daring feats were even captured on film many times. He modestly gave much of the credit to his dogs, who regularly risked and gave their lives in the spirit of the chase.

Born in Russia in 1890, Sasha Siemel ran away from home at the tender age of sixteen. Going to Germany as a ship stowaway, hiding in the anchor chain box of a small German steamer, he ultimately ended up in America where he learned to read and write English. Soon after, he sailed for Argentina to meet his brother and started a modest life there working in a machine shop.

Living “in town” lasted only three years. Eventually, he ventured north to the great Brazilian wilderness known as the Matto Grosso. This vast marshland jungle wilderness, headwaters of the Paraguay River, was twice the size of Texas and home to alligators, marsh deer, capavir, tapir, wild pigs, anteaters, monkeys, puma, ocelot, and huge jaguars, not to mention hostile primitive Indian tribes. There, in this great wilderness, his quest for freedom, adventure, and a love of the great outdoors quickly turned him into a professional jaguar hunter, tracking down problem “tigres” (jaguars) for

the few large, gutsy cattle ranchers trying to raise livestock on the fringes of this remote jungle region. Horses and dogs became his only “family” for many years, as he lived a life that truly defined freedom.

Among the spotted cats, jaguars are by far the largest. Where cheetah and leopard range in size similar to our native mountain lion, jaguar are one size bigger. An adult male will often weigh in at well over three hundred pounds. A jaguar’s wild disposition is unique among felines. Where lions, leopards and tigers can be tamed and even trained, I doubt you’ll ever see a jaguar in a circus act.

Sasha and his dogs tracked down and killed over a hundred jaguars with his rifle. Then one day, he heard of a native Indian who fought jaguar armed only with a “zagaya” or spear. The Indian, Joaquim by name, was of the Guato tribe. Always hunting alone, he did not throw his spear. Instead, he would provoke a charge. As the enraged cat attacked, he would plant the foot of his spear, impale the jaguar at arms’ length and hold onto his weapon until it was over. These tales fascinated Sasha to the extent he sought out this Indian in hopes of photographing man and beast in mortal combat, with only the trusted faith of cold blue steel between them.

In 1919, during the same era when Pope and Young befriended Ishi, Sasha found the solitary Indian, Joaquim, living in a simple hut, employed by a large ranch to control their jaguar numbers. Accompanying the Indian, Sasha soon witnessed his first jaguar spearfight. He became so overwhelmed with the intoxicating surge of adrenaline, he asked the native “tigrero” (jaguar hunter) to teach him the remarkable skill that was fast becoming a lost art among the waning Brazilian native tribes.

Sasha crafted his first spear. It had a six foot hardwood handle tipped with a twelve inch blade. He forged it with a three inch cross-piece stopper to retard penetration.

As an enthusiastic student, he listened intently to Joaquim and learned there were two types of jaguar charges. The first comes in fast and low to the ground. The second is a leap for the hunter’s head, neck, or throat. Each attack required a different defense. A skilled tigrero could tell which offensive maneuver the cat would likely make according to how the animal’s front feet and tail were positioned.

The idea was to impale the cat, then get him on his back while retaining balance. While trying to stay clear of the cat’s sharp claws, the hunter would attempt to pin the tigre to the ground while the spear did its job.

Although probably somewhat too soon, when Sasha felt he was ready, he faced his first angry jaguar with Joaquim right behind him. It almost became his last cat fight. Sasha lost his precious balance, dropped his seven foot spear, and nearly got mauled or killed, when the Indian quickly stepped in with his own spear to save the fallen white man. It was a serious lesson never to be forgotten.

I thought it interesting that defensive tactics would vary according to the size of the cat and type of charge. Sasha said the momentum of a full charge from a jaguar up to two hundred pounds could be stopped by bracing the handle of the spear against both of his knees. If the tigre weighed over two hundred pounds, the impact was too much. Then the butt end of the spear had to be instantly dropped down during the moment of impact, driving the butt end of the spear into the ground to stop the charge. Next, Sasha would try to hurl the snarling cat onto its back, sidestepping behind the cat’s head immediately after impact. It was imperative to get behind the cat’s head or you would either be ripped open with his front claws or the cat would be able to kick out the spear. A wounded tigre

would charge up to four or five times if he got off the spear and rarely retreated or tried to run away.

Siemel's first solo fight was a turning point in his life. After that, he lived on a barge and hunted jaguar for several of the larger ranches bordering the Matto Grosso. On the 1,500 square mile Estacia Miranda ranch alone, jaguars killed over 3,000 head of the 50,000 cattle there annually. Domestic cattle were easy prey for jaguars. A single cat would sometimes kill up to a dozen head of cattle per night just for sport.

When hunting alone, Sasha seldom again carried a gun but preferred to rely upon his trusted spear and one of his heavy yew longbows. Bayed tigras were fought with his spear. Those that treed or refused to charge were shot with the longbow.

Sasha's life was a series of adventures. His brother was murdered in 1926. His Indian mentor, Joaquim, was eventually killed by a big jaguar. Jumped from behind by the man-eating tigre as he tied up his canoe, Sasha discovered his native friend's remains alongside the Indian's mute spear and canoe. He later avenged his mentor's death by tracking down and killing his friend's killer.

Sasha Siemel was the victor in 31 consecutive spear fights with jaguars. He used his yew longbows to kill many others. He guided dozens of American sportsmen to even more of the spotted trophies. In all, he personally took over 270 of the big cats. In almost thirty years, he was only hurt twice. Once, early in his career, he accidentally shot himself in the leg with a revolver during an especially close encounter. He nearly died of gangrene before he was taken many miles cross country to a hospital. The other time, he stepped on a big alligator while in hot pursuit. The gator instantly grabbed him, ultimately leaving scars on his foot and ankle.

In the early 1930s, Sasha was asked to come back to the United States where he started lecturing to large audiences during the heat of the Brazilian hot seasons. He regularly spoke at the Adventurers Club in Los Angeles, the Explorers Club in New York and to the National Geographic Society in Washington, D.C. Interestingly enough, the majority of his audiences were often women, who found this adventurous man intriguing.

Sasha eventually contracted to make a film on jungle life that never transpired. He ended up returning to South America annually to guide even more sportsmen, including Teddy and Kermit Roosevelt.

Somewhere in this same time period, he came into contact with bowhunting pioneers Art Young, Dr. Robert Elmer, George Brommers, author Erle Stanley Gardner and other notables. Brothers of the bow and lovers of hunting, they immediately liked each other and eventually became close personal friends. Sasha kept in contact with his many archery friends via mail and the periodical, *Ye Sylvan Archer*.

Sasha Siemel didn't get married until he was fifty years old. In 1940, he married a 21 year old Pennsylvania girl and took her jaguar hunting, where she killed both tigre and puma with her 50 lb. longbow. Soon after, the couple moved back to Brazil's inland rivers where they lived together on a drifting houseboat and raised a family.

Sasha never killed without good reason and often preached outdoor ethics to family and clients alike. His wife told me of his frustration while guiding "sportsmen" who wanted to shoot everything that moved. The Siemel home always boasted a menagerie of wild pets.

In the late 1940s, Sasha retired and moved to a rural ivy-covered two hundred year old stone house near Green Lane, Pennsylvania. He died there in 1970 at the age of

80. His wife, Edith, died in 2012 at age 93. I contacted Edith several times during the completion of this article. I'm proud to say I have two of Sasha's personal bows. One was made for him by his friend Ben Pearson and the other from a stave given to him by either Art Young or George Brommers.

Sasha Siemel was not culturally deprived. He spoke five languages: Russian, Spanish, English, German, and Portuguese. He was well-read in poetry and philosophy. He was a hardened William Shakespeare fan.

There have been no less than five books written about this great man's life in the South American wilderness. Julian Duguid wrote *Green Hell*, the story of a courageous journey guided by Siemel through an untamed land not only inhabited by jaguars, but by headhunters and cannibals, snakes, ticks, mosquitoes, gators, giant tarantulas, and piranha infested waters. Duguid also wrote Sasha Siemel's biography *Tiger-Man* in 1932. Sasha later wrote his own autobiography, *Tigrero!*, in 1953. A fourth book, entitled *Sashino*, was written by his good friend Edward O'Brien in 1965, in the eyes of Sasha's son. Edith Siemel told her own story in her book, *Jungle Wife*, in 1949.

For those willing to do a little library research, there was an article written by Sasha in the June 1947 Issue of *Collier's* magazine about his feline vocation. There have also been several short stories and/or letters written by or about Sasha in early copies of *Ye Sylvan Archer*, as mentioned previously. Peter Hathaway Capstick wrote of Sasha's adventures as well, although Edith Siemel told me Capstick's imagination got the best of him in several accounts.

Sasha Siemel was not only unique as a hunter, but as a man. He was truly one of the world's greatest adventurers and a very graphic personality. If you ever get a chance to read any of his true life experiences, don't let the opportunity slip by. He was unequivocally one of the world's most courageous hunters and also gets my vote, hands down, for a one-of-a-kind man of valor.