

Living History from The Departed – Mervin F. Roberts

by Lee Finley



I had the initial pleasure of contacting Mervin Roberts (1922 – 2020) following a suggestion from Jim Atz, an old “fish friend” of his. This contact, via a long telephone call, led to many enjoyable conversations and mail exchanges scattered over the following years. My last talk with him was not too long before his passing, and he was as mentally spry as ever.

Mervin led a long, varied, exciting, and fruitful life. He was a decorated naval officer in World War Two; a Merchant Marine officer; a Boy Scout Master; a Counselor to the Connecticut Governor on aquaculture and a consultant on the same worldwide; a pioneer on high-speed animal photography and the author of numerous pet related books (on various small mammals, and a variety of reptiles and birds. These were predominately published by T.F.H Publications). I

could go on and on here as Mervin was a man of many talents. He had stated that he never really worked – he did what he enjoyed and got paid for it. What more could one ask out of life? Later in life, he became a Blog writer, and I would strongly suggest to anyone wishing to look deeper into his life to go to his Blog site - <https://www.mervinfroberts.com> -which is still up as of this writing) and tour around.

But here, I am offering a short window into another area of his enjoyment – the aquarium hobby. And, of course, he had written a couple of small books in this area, including the classic 1957 look at “Fancy Guppies” and the people who raised them.

The aquarium hobby is composed of people, and information regarding many of them contributes to the history of the same. Mervin discussed with me many of the hobby (and business) parties that he knew and had interactions with over the years. Receiving this kind of information from someone who was there and involved becomes living history and deserves to be addressed. When the person offering such information is gone, so is, in many cases, the information. Trying to remember the many various things from many conversations that we had can be difficult. But Mervin had a remedy for that. One day a decent sized packet from him arrived in the mail, and contained therein was a small stack of handwritten sheets of paper. Each of these provided various thoughts and comments on many of the aquarium hobby greats from the 1930s through the 1970s. One additional follow-up mailing completed the set. I feel that it is now time to enter these bits of living aquarium history from Mervin into the record, and certainly there is no better place to do this than in the monthly publication of the MOAPH website. Also, these original sheets will be donated to the MOAPH library to become a permanent and preserved record.

As noted above, what follows are bits and thoughts from Mervin Roberts regarding various persons that they knew and interacted with in the aquarium hobby. In the 1968 edition of their book “The Goldfish,” George Hervey and Jack Hems headed the chapter on “History” with the following 1750 quote from Philip Stanhope: “History is only a confused heap of facts.” Certainly, what follows may fit a loose definition of a “heap of facts,” as experienced by Mervin. I actually kind of prefer to call them tidbits. But in no way do I consider them as “confused.” They may vary in their importance, but that is for potential historians to decide. Without question, there are some interesting (and fun) little tidbits that to the best of my knowledge, exist nowhere else (e.g., what was the favorite brand of ice cream of William T. Innes? Read on to find out). I hope that you might enjoy reading these as much as I have. I was the first to do so...you are the second.

A note: What follows are as they were written by Mervin with only a minimal amount of editing. For clarity of some mentions, I have added some brief material, and these are indicated by being placed in brackets.

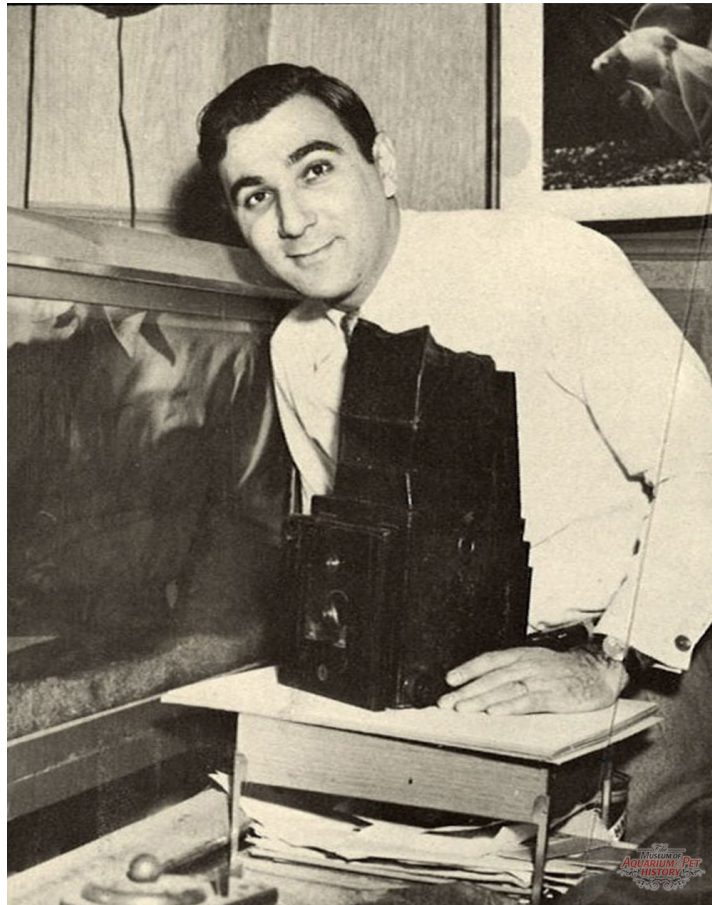
James W. Atz

Jimmy Atz worked for [Christopher W.] Coates at the N.Y Aquarium, but they didn't get along. Eventually, Jim went to AMNH [American Museum of Natural History].

I had a photo assignment from Herb Axelrod for a toad book, and eventually I got a picture of a toad with its tongue sticking out, catching a bug. Then I worked up to a green frog on my own. Pretty soon, I had a green frog in multiple flashes as it jumped through the air with its tongue out, and the bug stuck on.

I called Jim and told him that I had a fork-tongued frog. He said, "Merv, you damn fool, they all have forked tongues, but how did you get to know?" I said I photographed it in mid-jump. He introduced me to the editor of Natural History Magazine, and eventually, it got on the cover. The multiple flashes came from four or five speedlights triggered in series, the delay coming from telephone relays.

Herbert R. Axelrod



Herb Axelrod married Evelyn Miller, daughter of a pet dealer in New Jersey, maybe Bayonne or Jersey City. He had a son by a previous marriage.

Herb never forgot anything. He played Mozart on his violin from memory and remembered the name of every fish he ever saw.

He sent me around the world looking for bargains. On one trip, he sent me to Denmark during Easter, not knowing that the whole nation closes for nearly two weeks to celebrate the holiday.

Herb always treated me honorably and generously.

Walter H. Chute

The Shedd Aquarium in Chicago had a large tank full of piranhas. None were cut up. Chute [the Director] told me that a smaller number would kill each other, but a mixed size large school would establish a peaceful community.

Fred Corwin

Fred Corwin raised cyprinodonts in New Jersey and operated a printing shop in lower Manhattan where he and I would lunch.

I think it was he who suggested I get to know Herb Axelrod.

Myron Gordon

Myron Gordon had an office and a few fish tanks at the American Museum of Natural History, where he studied the genetics of some cancers in fish. He worked with platties and swordtails and their crosses. He found some crosses that would always develop cancer and others that would not. Jim Atz was at the museum also, having left the N.Y. Aquarium where he worked for Coates.

I visited frequently, especially around 1949-1950, when my wife and I lived in Manhattan, across the street from the AMNH. I had a sinecure with the old Port Authority of New York and plenty of time for fishes. Myron smoked a pipe, and I always enjoyed the aroma in his office.

The cancer study was financed in part by the Rockefeller Foundation, and of course, he would hob-nob with the other cancer researchers. They told him to quit smoking. So, he did, and soon he was dead. I think the shock to his system of giving it up contributed to his death.

Paul Hahnel

Paul Hahnel was, I think, a machinist. His hobby was the veiltail guppy, and his success was in large part, he told me, due to ruthless culling. He lived in Bronx, New York.

Paul did use fish of other breeders to introduce new colors and vigor into his strains. I know that because I helped him get some of those fish.

William T. Innes



William T. Innes and his brother were printers in Philadelphia. So was Benjamin Franklin. Bill Innes, to me, exhibited some of those traits that are ascribed to Ben. I think Innes was a printer

who brought his hobby into the publishing business – that is, he was not an ichthyologist or a taxonomist or a breeder or an importer.

He treated G. S. Meyers like a son who made good.

He treated me to Dolly Madison ice cream when I visited him in Philly.

George Sprague Myers. Ph.D.

He would be 100 years old now [This was written in March 2006]. I met him when he was about 40, and I was about 25. He was on his way from San Francisco to Washington, D.C., on a transcontinental train in 1946, and I was en route to New York after several years in the Pacific as an amphibious naval officer. We were on that train together for three or four days, and I quickly learned that a biology professor of 40 could outdrink a naval officer of 25 – or at least this one could.

Myers was the bridge between Innes in Philadelphia with his magazine [The Aquarium] and the society in San Francisco with its journal [The Aquarium Journal]. The society had its brine shrimp from the Leslie Salt Company, I think, in San Francisco Bay, and Innes had his colored fishes [this would refer to the classic Innes color photographs] done by one or two of his daughters. T.F.H. came along perhaps 10 years later.

Herman Rabenau

Rabenau was in or near Baldwin, Long Island [New York], when I knew him. His home was his hatchery, and I remember walking over floor grating that could be lifted to get at the fishes.

He would sell young fish by the dozen and had all sorts of barbs and livebearers – red, blue, and black platties.

Rabenau had a helper who looked like the archetype Nordic. Rabenau was short and had a round head. He was mostly bald when I knew him circa 1936. [A note: Earlier ads that I have seen located Rabenau at a Brooklyn, N.Y. address.]

Hugo Schnelle

Hugo Schnelle ran the Paramount [Aquarium, Inc.] business in Ardsley, Westchester County, New York. He raised his own daphnia in a small pond near the concrete building that housed the fish. His business was importing, mostly cans of fishes from the upper Amazon.

His brother-in-law Fred Cochu was the collector-pilot, and he would fly catholic priests into the upper Amazon of Brazil and Peru and take out fish.

I would visit him in the 1950s when I lived in Crestwood and White Plains, Westchester County, N.Y. This is when I refined the technologies of aquarium photography that Bill Innes taught me. I used a 3 ¼ X 4 ¼ long Graflex bellows with an eight-inch lens that I adapted for Edgerton's flash.

William Sternke

Bill Sternke earned a living selling livebearers and plants in Florida. He was always generous and patient with me. He explained the reasons why Florida's west coast went to ponds and the east coast went to concrete and glass.

Sternke had really good mollies and helleri-platy crosses.

Frederick H. Stoye

Fred Stoye was a Long Island [New York] radio telegrapher who retained his connections with explorers and collectors. I think it was he who let me have my first *C. cutteri*. [A cichlid then in the genus *Cichlasoma* – now in *Cryptoheros*].

He lived, I think, in Sayville, Long Island, New York, and my father would drive me to his home from time to time.

He and Rabenau and Schnelle and Cochu were part of the German connection.

A last note: The above information from Mervin obviously, and as intended, only scratches the surface. For more information on each of the parties mentioned, you can, of course, check the internet. But a potentially better source, which does provide some information and context on most of the parties, is Albert J. Klee's 2003 book "The Toy Fish: A History of the Aquarium Hobby in America – The First One-Hundred Years." This book belongs in the library of anyone with an interest in the history of aquariums.