

by John C. Lucadema

What Was The Pet Field Like Back When . . . ?

The author worked in all phases of the field . . . and shares his experiences as a retailer and wholesaler with us

John C. Lucadema is now 73, and thoroughly enjoying his retirement.

AS FAR BACK as I can remember we had pets in our family. My love for birds and animals went beyond the usual boy-loves-dog stage. I made them a part of my life.

I had my first real experience with pets when I was 10 years old. My older brother presented me with a loft of fantail pigeons which turned out to be the spark that lit the fire. I started raising fancy pigeons and racing homing pigeons with hopes of selling them later on. My first big business transaction was a deal I made with the owners of a large squab farm. They wanted to buy all the homing pigeons I could get my hands on. In 1912 I bought out the Montclair, N.J., squab farm, which at the time, consisted of 1,700 giant squab breeding pigeons, some having a wing spread of 37 inches.

Now that my once small business venture was growing rapidly, I realized that I would have to find a partner. John Schuster, then a horse and buggy dealer, agreed to go into business with me. Now I was really traveling in style. I had started out on foot carrying a burlap bag over my shoulder. Then I advanced to a bicycle, and now I did my traveling in a horse and buggy.

The Beginning

When business was really booming, Uncle Sam called and in 1918 I enlisted in the Air Force. When I arrived home I decided to go into the pet business, and raise birds, dogs and other livestock. The ideal spot for the shop was a large garage in the rear of my folks' house. My old partner rejoined me and we proceeded to build cages and pens on both sides of the garage. We called our business the "Jersey Pet Stock Farm." We sold turkeys, chickens, rabbits and just about every other pet imaginable. On our

first Thanksgiving day we took in over \$500, which gave us some good profit in 1920.

By this time we had a 1914 Ford to do our traveling in. One day we traveled 80 miles to Mansquan, N.J., to buy 500 guinea pigs and by the time we got home, 25 babies had been born. We sold all the young females to one man at \$5 apiece.

Before long, I bought out my partner and moved the business to a four acre farm about 12 miles from Newark. This ideal location had broader houses, barns and sheds which could accommodate all the chickens and animals I had in stock. I was doing quite well, but had a yen to operate a pet shop in the city. So about two years later, I contacted a friend who had a lot of experience in the pet line. We got together and opened a small shop on Broad Street in Newark, and named it Bond & Lucadema. Pretty soon business really started booming and we were being crowded out of our small store. First we moved to a store five times as large as our other at 367 Broad St., Newark; then to 427 Broad St., Newark.

Advertising used to keep me pretty busy back then. I used to go to the animal houses in New York and buy a rare animal, and then call the newspapers and have them take pictures. I was featured on the front pages many times and also in the Ripley & John Hix column, "Strange As It Seems." I was known as the "Animal Man" around town and people would come many miles just to look around and see some of the rare animals I had such as a mule eared fox (fenec) and a wild dog from Australia which would put out lighted matches and cigarettes with his paw, then roll on them to make sure they were out.

I now had a manager operating the pet shop and business had increased, so I moved to a larger store nearer the heart of the city. I remember one time I sold a giant ape weighing over
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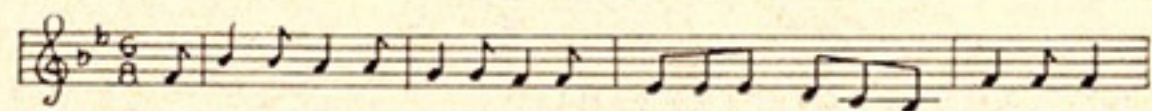
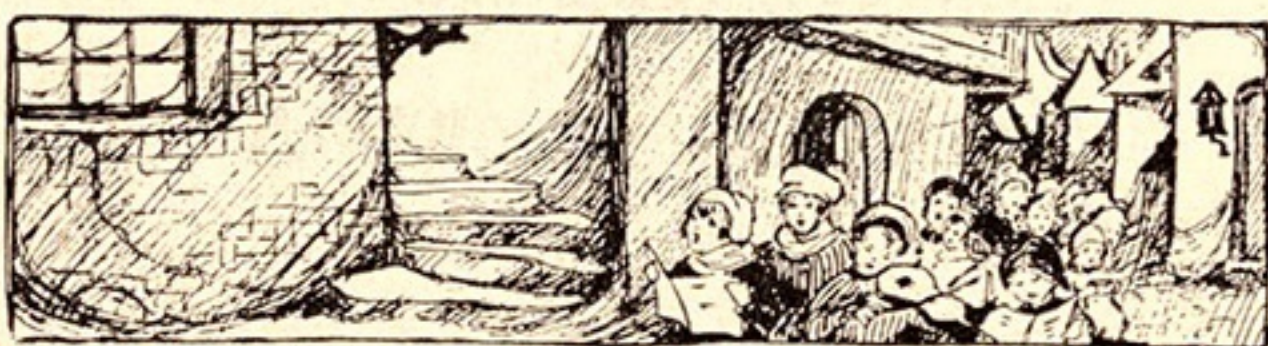
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Back When . . .

(Continued from Page 92)

100 pounds to a bootlegger during prohibition to guard his liquor stock. While there was a poker game going on in the back room, the ape got loose and walked in on the party scaring them half to death. The owner took him out to the garage and chained him to the steering wheel of his new Cadillac. The next morning he found that the ape had torn out all the upholstery in the car—about \$700 damage. He brought the ape back to me and made me a present of him. I later sold the ape to a zoo in Lincoln, Neb.

By now I had acquired a considerable amount of experience with monkeys, chimpanzees and apes and I was always looking for something new and different. I came in touch with a Mr. Ruhe who operated a bird and animal business. Mr. Ruhe told me of a baby gorilla for sale in Duseldorf, Germany. I was a little hesitant about buying this gorilla, since gorillas run into thousands of dollars. So I started to study the gorilla situation in this country. Ringling Brothers' Circus had lost two of theirs and there were only a very few in the zoos. Bronx Park, Philadelphia, Washington and Chicago Zoos each had one but as far as could be determined they were all males. So, wanting to be different, I hoped for a female and had Mr. Ruhe cable Germany to ascertain the sex of the one they had. To my great joy, they replied that it was in fact a female. I agreed to the purchase price and the next problem was to get her over here.

A Gorilla

The German Airship, the Graf Zeppelin, was about to make a trip to America and I thought it would be good advertising to have the gorilla arrive with fanfare. Mr. Ruhe also had some 600 canaries flown at the same time and the St. Louis Zoo had a chimpanzee and some rare birds also flown on the airship. Susie, the name we chose for her, arrived in America Oct. 29, 1929.

Her first exhibit upon arrival was at Wanamaker's Department Store in New York. She was shown there for three days and created quite a sensation. The newspapers gave her a lot of publicity with pictures and a story on the front pages. She was reported to be the first female gorilla in captivity.

After her showing at Wanamaker's, I took her back to my shop and put her on exhibition free of charge until a circus man came in to see her. He said to me, "You know, you have a fortune in that cage and it's not bringing in a dime." I asked him what he would do and he said he would go right down to Broad and Market Streets in Newark, one of the busiest four corners of the world, and rent an empty store and put her on exhibition and charge a quarter to see her. I took his advice and rented a store for \$1,200 a month. She was an immediate success. People stood in line for days to see her. Of course, after a time, business started to drop and Susie and I joined a wild west show, the Ringling Brothers' Barnum & Bailey Circus, and I also showed her at the Toronto Fair Exhibition, where we topped the Midway. I later took her to Florida where I joined the Johnny J. Jones Show.

When we took the show back to Newark, the depression was becoming severe. People had stopped buying pets which were a luxury and I had to reduce the help and one of the men who worked for me opened a pet shop right next door. I let my manager go and he opened up on the other side of me—so, I was in the middle of two other pet shops. I had a large sign made running from each pet shop, reading "Main Entrance to the Pet Shop." The depression put us all out of business. I eventually sold Susie to the Cincinnati Zoo. I disposed of all my animals to various shows and zoos and I accepted a position with the U.S. Zoological Gardens, Washington, D.C., and remained there during the depression.

After World War II broke out, I

went back into the bird and animal business and took a store on Market Street near the Penn Station in Newark. My wife passed away and I sold the home and the business and went to Florida to live. Before I left, I went around to say good bye to my friends and stopped at Shellgrams Wholesale Pet Supplies in Newark. Jimmie, the owner, asked me to look up a pet shop in Miami that was advertised for sale. He said that if I thought it was a good buy, I should let him know and he would buy it. I did look it over and bought it myself.

Bascom's Pet Shop

The shop was "Bascom's Pet Shop" located on West Flagler Street. The shop had been in operation since 1927. Their main business was importing and exporting rare and exotic birds all over the world. The original flock of flamingos at Hialeah Race Track was purchased from Bascom's. The first dozen did not settle and flew away. Therefore, Mr. Bascom decided to pinion one wing so they couldn't fly. The second flock did settle and raised many young. In fact, they have over 400 there now. Most of the flamingos in this country originated from stock sold by Bascom's, since he was the only bird and animal dealer in Florida at that time.

Desi Arnez, the well-known television and movie star, had his first American job at Bascom cleaning out bird cages, after he arrived in the United States from Cuba.

Connected to the shop was a large enclosed yard with a fountain and pool filled with flamingos, white and black swans, African crown cranes, storks, colored ibis, rare wood ducks, white and blue peacocks, and many other rare birds. Flamingo sales were going great guns and I made a deal with the Hialeah Race Track to take their young ones. They would send me the flamingos and in exchange, I would send them feed for their flock. In order to keep them pink, a special food was

made up of boiled rice and granulated dog food, with paprika added. One pair of flamingos was requested to be sent to Lord and Lady Duffield at Sussex, England, by air freight.

One day a lady walked into the store with a cage of beautiful colored birds. She stated that they were painted buntings and I asked her where she had obtained them. She said she raised them and sold them to all the pet shops. So, I bought all she had — seven at \$5 each. I had had them in the store about a week when federal agents came in and took the birds and gave me a summons to appear before the U.S. judge in federal court. I was found guilty of confining these wild birds in cages and fined \$25. I didn't know they were wild birds. I thought the lady had raised them herself. However, nothing was done to the lady as the birds were found in my possession. I tried to recover my original \$35 and the \$25 fine from her, but had no success.

Once I sold one mynah to a Brooklyn man who was vacationing in Florida. He called by phone from New York after he purchased the bird and called me a crook because the bird wouldn't talk. After I calmed him down, I told him he could send the bird back and I would refund his money. Before he hung up, I told him to keep repeating his name and gave him the wolf whistle to give the bird. I told him to do this about a month and then write and let me know how he was doing. Well, the man wrote me the nicest letter saying how sorry he was about the way he had talked to me over the phone. Apparently the bird had learned to talk.

I was getting along in years and decided to retire and dispose of the business and property. My last big order was to Bush Gardens in Tampa, Fla. I sent them 26 flamingos, several pairs of white swans, black swans, parrots and a thick billed parrakeet (very rare) and a lovely blue and gold macaw parrot, Betty, the feature of their bird show.

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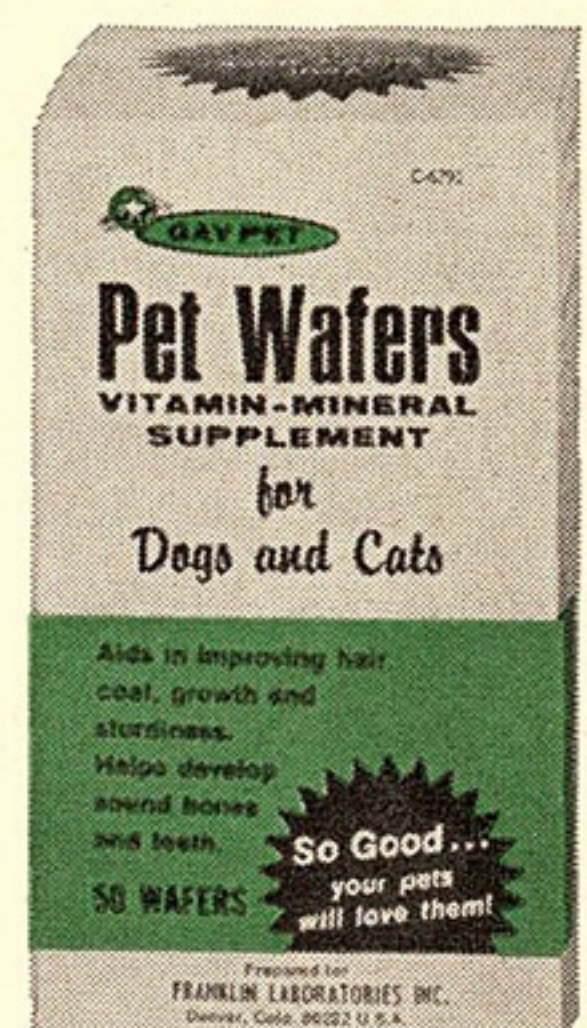


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