

# Remembering those Prosperous '30s



by G. STEVEN DOW

In these times of economic gloom and doom-saying, some of us in the Industry have begun to wonder what would happen to our businesses if a real depression hit us. Would we have to watch everything we worked for wiped away by dwindling pet sales to a public with ever decreasing disposable income?

What many of us have forgotten—or perhaps have never known—is that the tropical fish end of the business was actually born during *the* Great Depression and weaned on World War II. Those were the days when the going was *really* tough. There was no trillion dollar GNP back then. When you said several million people were unemployed, you were talking about a full third of the workforce. Money was a scarce commodity indeed.

Perhaps you didn't know that while recessions have come and gone, with a dotting government ever ready to bail out floundering giants of industry, the tropical fish business has grown and blossomed virtually without setback. There is one industry which has happily replaced the ups and downs of the economic cycle with a steady curve of growth.

To find out what it was really like in those heroic Depression days, we went to interview Fred Cochu, one of the several founding fathers of the tropical fish industry. In his time Cochu has made over 200 trips to the Amazon and its tributaries, and nearly as many to the Far East. This is the adventurer who brought in the first Cardinal Tetras commercially available anywhere and the entrepreneur who carried canisters of fish aboard the zeppelin Hindenburg before the

Second World War in the infant industry's first international air shipment.

Mr. Cochu's memories are interesting in their own right, but they are also most useful to dealers faced with—if not a Great Depression—a time of economic adversity and general pessimism.

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*Mr. Cochu, how do you feel the Depression affected you back in 1934 when you started dealing in tropical fish?*

When I started, we were of course in the heart of the Great Depression. The first year I was in business I grossed \$27,000. Can you imagine that twenty years later I was grossing about a million a year?

*What was the appeal of tropical fish to the consumer back then?*

In those days people had no television sets and not much money, but they all wanted something alive in the house. Either a dog, or a bird, or a cat, or at least a tropical fish. Of course, fish were the least expensive.

*How did you do during the Depression? Was it really possible to make a profit and a decent living?*

Yes, absolutely! Every year things just kept on improving. Things just kept going up and up and up.

*Did you have any difficulty getting supplied?*

Yes. In those days there were not many fish on the market. I had to arrange expeditions to get new fish myself. That's how I got started importing in 1937, and that's why I made my first trip to South America. And you had to come up with something new all the time. Every month we had a new fish to really get the hobby going.

*What kinds of stores did better then—full-line pet shops or those that specialized in tropical fish?*

I believe it was the fish stores. You know, now it's big business. We didn't have the discount houses then. But I am not in favor of selling tropical fish when there are no experienced people around to take care of them. I believe you must have somebody who can give an intelligent answer when the customer has a question. The dealer should know his fish. For instance, you go into a dime store today, you ask the attendant for help, and often, even usually, they do not know one fish from another. That is not good for a hobby; it can hurt it, even destroy it.

*Was there much domestic breeding going on during the Depression?*

Well, here in Florida there were a few breeders. Bill Sternke was the earliest and then there was Mr. Greenberg of Everglades. Those were the two first, I believe. Then they began to get bigger and bigger, like we did.

*What were typical retail prices for fish during the period?*



I remember on Nassau Street in New York, a very popular street for tropical fish, there were three stores on a single block. They had small angelfish selling for as cheap as five cents each!

*There weren't any neons or Cardinals then, were there?*

I brought in the first neons back in 1937. This Frenchman, Rabaut, brought in the first load. I immediately hired him and tied him up, and that way I got an exclusive on the whole Amazon area.

*What did a neon retail for in 1937?*

Well, the very first neons went for about \$10 each.

*It's hard to believe you could sell any fish for that much at that time.*

Well, as a matter of fact, we sold plenty. We brought in the first shipment of 5,500 neons—which was a huge amount of fish back then—and we sold all of them. After that, say ten years later, we sold 5,500 neons a day! But the regular price of neons, after they became well known and in greater supply, settled down to about \$1.39 each.

*What was the wholesale price of neons?*

The wholesale price was about 50¢ or 60¢ each for regular small neons. And once a year we would always have a big special on them. About four weeks

before Christmas until December 15th, for those two weeks, we sold neons for 39¢ each wholesale to dealers. We would sell as many as 100,000 neons in those two weeks—and, remember, we're still talking about the Depression!

Actually, those were the best years for us, because we had something to sell that was entirely new. We were commuting back and forth from Germany as well as South America all the time, always bringing in fish. There wasn't much breeding being done here, so we had to import most of our fishes. Of course, there were Bettas raised out in California and Goldfish were raised in the Midwest. But we were the first that ever started importing on a big scale. We took chances, though. It was all a big gamble. But it paid off.

*It sounds like you had an enormous demand just waiting to be supplied by the first comer. Was it really as easy as that?*

Not really, you had to *create* the demand to some extent, to build it up. You had to come up with something new, get people interested, and so on. And while we are on that subject, let me say this. Dr. Axelrod is a controversial figure, but I believe he has done a tremendous job building up the hobby. He promoted it. He is a great promoter. I've been in South America with Dr. Axelrod, and he was one man, one of the very few white men that I've ever known, who was not afraid to go into the interior and was never afraid to jump in the water, never afraid of big snakes or gators.

But, as I say, he was also a great promoter and largely responsible for creating the demand that you have to have in any hobby.

*How were live fish transported during the Depression?*

You must remember that before the war all the fish came into the U.S. by ship, with the exception of the one air shipment I brought in on the Hindenburg. After the war, I was the first to start on the air shipments.

*Wait a minute. You say you brought in fish on the zeppelin Hindenburg? The enormous transcontinental blimp that eventually blew up in New Jersey? What was your crossing time and how many fish did you bring in?*

It took us three days to cross and I brought in only ten cans of fish. Of course, those ten cans had a higher markup and profit than 100 boxes have today.

*How did you get the fishes to the dealers?*

In those days, all domestic shipments were by railway express. We shipped the fish in metal containers with cotton wrapped around it, then paper wrapped around that. It was a real warm package. Everything went by railroad, to Chicago, California, Ohio, wherever we shipped fish, that's the way they went.

*Did you use oxygen?*

No, just water and fish. And all the



fish were in one can together, maybe 50 varieties in one can. It took the dealers hours to sort them all out after they arrived.

*It sounds as if the fish business is somehow immune from general economic disasters. Didn't you see any signs of stress during the period, or during subsequent recessions?*

Once the hobby became established and tropical fish were known, all of a sudden stores popped up all over. I don't think we ever suffered at all. But there were price wars then. It was really not necessary, but there were big price wars, even among wholesalers. There was Amazonica, C&L, Cosmos, and, of course, us, Paramount. I eventually had to buy them out, all of them, one by one, to end this ridiculous price cutting. In fact, that was why we got into the retail business. The wholesale price of catfish was about 59¢, for example. In the price wars, if a dealer sold the catfish retail for 60¢, well, the next day our retail store sold catfish for 19¢. Believe me, that reduced price cutting after that.

*But getting back to the economy-at-large, would you say that the tropical fish industry is relatively recession proof?*

I'd say so, yes. I feel that if you have a good, clean store, with a good variety of healthy fish, you will always make a good living.

*Then the history of the business has been one of constant growth without*

*any serious setbacks?*

No, there were problems during the war. We were not able to get fish from any foreign country. That's really when the hatcheries got started. We bought this piece of land in Ardsley, New York, and built a big hatchery and started breeding all the popular varieties like angelfish, zebras, bloodfins, head and tail lights, etc., just to keep going, just to breeze through the war. And then while I was in the service of the U.S. Government, collecting electric eels, whenever I came back, I always had a can or two of import fish with me. That helped.

*How many fish were in these cans of yours?*

That depends on what kind of fish, of course, but with neons, for example, we usually had about 300 in a can.

*What was the availability of dry goods during the war?*

Do you know how Aquarium Stock Company got through the war successfully? Mr. Leonard Berkitz's father had the company and Leonard was working there. Well, in 1939, when Germany went to war, the old man took all his savings and bought dry goods. He bought aquariums from Metaframe, heaters from Danner, and so on. Whatever he could lay his hands on, he bought. So when the U.S. entered the war, he had a big warehouse full of aquarium supplies. He was sitting on top of the world. The dealers couldn't get anything, anywhere, unless they went to Aquarium

Stock. You can imagine the situation.

On the whole, though, I'd say that the Industry breezed through the war, just holding its own. No new fish came in, nothing new or exciting happened, but right after, that's when we went out and got the fish. From 1945 on, the hobby really developed and went up and up from then until today.

*How did you do in the recession of '58?*

Beautiful, no problems at all. What is not pleasant, what is aggravating, is that there are always people in the business who want to be the cheapest. It is not necessary to cut prices. If a fancier comes in and wants a particular fish, if it is a good fish, he will pay for it. Price is no great object. If you go in a real cut-rate place, and see fish for eight or nine cents, and they are sick, that is no bargain and you know it. Of course, you have to keep your prices in line. You can't sell a Zebra Danio for \$10 either. I always said the minimum you should sell tropical fish for is 100% markup.

*While we're on the subject of markup, what was the typical retail markup during the Depression?*

Oh, about 200% was average.

*Would you say that could be considered a fair markup, all things considered, in today's market?*

Yes, I think that is fair.

*If another depression really hits, would you see our Industry getting*



*into deep trouble?*

No, not at all, it will never be in trouble. But quite a few dealers will go out of business, I am sure of that. Those that know their business, however, and have good quality stock will stay healthy.

*If economic conditions are not the biggest headache of the tropical fish industry today, what is?*

Well, right now, it is the cost of transportation. To bring in a box of fish from Thailand or Hong Kong or Singapore will cost you anything between \$58 and \$66. That is just too much. Therefore, people are starting to breed tropical fish domestically again.

Let me give you an example. We received a shipment the day before yesterday. There was one box of spiny eels. The eels, in the Far East, cost six cents each. There are 100 eels in the box, and freight was \$66. So, that's 66¢ freight per eel and six cents per eel, which brings the price to 72¢ per fish (assuming none die). On our present price list they are selling for 65¢ each, which, of course, has to be changed now. All these price increases only came about within the last six months. It used to be \$35 a box of fish from the Far East. Now, it's doubled.

That's why the better breeders will try to breed these fish that come from the Far East right here in Florida. That will help. There are about twelve different varieties of angels imported now from Hong Kong. Well, those fish can be raised here, and you have a larger fish, usually, because those fish that

are coming from the Far East are usually small ones. And dealers prefer to buy domestic raised fish providing the price is about the same as import fish.

Years ago, almost all the fish were bred in Germany, and came over from there. Now, most fish are bred in Hong Kong, Singapore and Bangkok. That is because labor is cheap, there is plenty of fish food available, all the daphnia you could want, etc. The only problem with this system is transportation. It's just too costly. That is what I'm working on now, trying to bring down the cost of transport, trying to beat the price. We are trying to get a jet and start flying again, to see if we can get the price down that way.

*If you had a DC-8, for example, outfitted for tropical fish, how much could you cut the price.?*

The way fish are packed now, with oxygen, etc., you don't need to equip a plane any special way, just keep it warm. As far as price, I can reduce the price \$20 a box. I'm sure I can still lay down a box for \$35. But it all depends on how much saleable merchandise we have going over there to cut down the price of aircraft operation.

*Getting back to the good old Depression days, were there dedicated hobbyists back then like there are now?*

Oh, yes, even more so than now. Because now a lot of people put aquariums in their homes for decorative purposes alone. In those days, no matter if you were fifty miles away, people would drive out just to buy fish.

*What was an average sale figure then for a typical customer?*

I would say it was less than \$10. Maybe \$5. Of course in our retail store in New York we handled live foods, live tubifex, daphnia, cyclops, white worms, etc., and a lot of people came in just for the live food, almost daily, and that sold for 25¢ a portion at that time.

*Were there any big spenders at the store back then?*

Well, not many, but there was always a certain class of people who could afford it. We have several well known millionaires as customers. Bing Crosby's family were always fish fanciers and Errol Flynn was a good customer. We had all kinds of customers, though, from taxi drivers to movie stars. Anybody could, and still can, keep tropical fish.

Mrs. Cochu was a fancier back then. Perhaps she can give us a customer's point of view. . .

[Mrs. Cochu:] Well, I wasn't a real fancier yet, at that time, but my brother really was. He was a real guppy fancier. He wasn't rich, but he didn't care what he paid for a good pair of guppies. If he really wanted them he'd find a way to buy them.

*What promotional techniques did you use to interest people in tropical fish during the Depression?*

Nothing special. It's pretty much the same as today. Someone would see an  
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solution directing the House Agricultural, Conservation and Internal Resources Committee, to study animal welfare. This study is directed at the breeding and sale of domestic animals, including warranties and guaranties surrounding their sale, health conditions and sanitation, humane practices, etc. Breeders and pet shop operators should follow this study carefully and may desire to submit material to the Committee.

#### WASHINGTON

H-136 (1-16-75) would appear to prohibit the use of dogs in hunting and makes provision for the holding of competitive field trials for hunting dogs by permit of the Department of Game.

#### WEST VIRGINIA

\*S-44 (1-13-75) is a broad bill relating to the regulation and control of dogs. It provides that dogs are personal property; and for the assessment and collection of a head tax of \$1.00 for each male or spayed female dog and \$2.00 for each non-spayed female dog. Would also require the registration of the dog and mandates a rabies vaccination prior to registration. Provision is made for the registration of kennels, pet shops, animal shelters and dog pounds. The license fee for kennels would be \$10.00 per year and for pet shops \$20.00 per year. The bill sets forth standards for the sanitary and humane conditions of kennels, pounds, shops, etc., and for their inspection. All dogs are required to be registered and to wear a registration tag at all times. Provision is made for dog pounds, enforcement officers, etc.

HB-681 (1-13-75) would declare dogs to be personal property and any dog over the age of six months shall be subject to taxation. (Note— The substance of this bill is also incorporated in S-44 above.)

S-151 (1-17-75) would allow the director of the Department of Natural Resources to issue a permit for the purpose of hunting, killing, taking, capturing or maintaining in captivity wild life or reptiles exclusively for scientific or propagation purposes, but not for any.

H-772 (1-17-75) is an endangered species bill and empowers the Director of the Department of Natural Resources to establish regulations protecting endangered species of game and non-game animals, and a list of such protected animals. □

#### DEPRESSION

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aquarium in another person's home and the next thing you know, they wanted one. The person would give them a couple of guppies, they all started with guppies, and the next thing you know, they would have fifty, then a hundred, and pretty soon they would have tropical fish all over the house.

[Mrs. Cochu:] Even today, if a person passes out baby guppies in the neigh-

borhood to all the kids, you will have the whole neighborhood keeping tropical fish. The guppy is probably the Industry's best ambassador, even today.

*How would you assess the state of the Industry today, Mr. Cochu?*

I would say that business is increasing daily. But what is needed is some new fish to breathe new life into the hobby. There is practically nobody out collecting these days. They are all using the same fish that we discovered

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years and years ago. What is needed now is some new fish.

*You haven't mentioned government restrictions. I take it you don't see that as a potential source of ruin for the Industry?*

No. What *could* ruin the Industry possibly is not the government, but the cost of transportation. That's our biggest headache today.

*I'm sure a lot of readers would be curious to know what the tropical fish dealer during the Depression expected to earn.*

Their gross profit was probably 50% of their gross receipts. It all depends on the size of the store and a lot of other variables. I will say this, a lot of dealers who were in tropical fish then are still in it today. The ones that go broke, they are the ones who get in, think they are going to make a fortune overnight, find out it's a lot of hard work, and they get out of it. They just don't know the business.

*How much did it cost a dealer to open a well stocked store of, say, about 1500 square feet in the Depression?*

I'd say about \$2,000 for a well stocked store.

*Finally, looking back on it all, what practical advice could you give to today's fish dealer, considering the economic situation? If the most pessimistic are right and another depression does come, how can he get through it?*

Well, I would tell retailers to put in the store 80% cheaper, more popular fish, and perhaps 20% of the rarer fish. A few years back, a 50-50 split was typical, but I don't think that this is too

wise today. You know, you mostly sell your common fish in a large volume. Back then, in our retail store, we had some huge display tanks in one section with all the rare fish. We had a fully set-up planted tank of each size, that was our display. They would stay there unless someone came in and wanted the whole tank, just the way it was, and then we would just replace it.

But basically, whatever does happen, I think that if a dealer has a clean and well stocked store with healthy fish, if he's established, he just has to ride along with the tide, just breeze through until this recession or depression passes. □

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