



Wardley's Ed Levey

The Last Years Are Best

Ed Levey gave his name to a company that made history around the world. It stands as a monument to a man and a family.

By
Bob Behme

SECAUCUS, NJ — A show business cliché argues that there is no such thing as an overnight success. It contends that stars who seem to make it with one picture have been around for years paying dues and waiting for the right opportunity.

Perhaps it is not surprising to discover the pet industry is much the same, for in animal land, as in Hollywood, a man with ideas and talent may wait years for the right time and place.

The success of Ed Levey illustrates that point. His story dates back to 1936 when he entered the industry. Yet his major achievement, that of creating the world's third largest-selling line of fish foods, came 14 years later when he founded Wardley Products.

The beginning

Ed Levey began as salesman in a business his sister, Francis, owned. It was not his first job, for he had tried other fields without finding the road to success, but it was to be his last. Francis had started in the pet field in 1904, had worked for one company all that time and had inherited Harold Pet Supply from Paul N. Freidlander, the German immigrant who founded it.

Harold's was noted for bird products, essentially food and a couple of medications. Ed packaged and sold the products. There were few wholesalers and not many pet shops in the '30's and Ed concentrated on the south, visiting stores from Washington, DC to Florida and Louisiana.

Money was tight and Ed was forced to collect enough cash at each stop to pay for gasoline to reach the next. He was expected to sell enough

product to cover expenses and to allow him to return with a surplus. He was a good salesman, easy going and friendly and Harold's prospered.

During the war business grew faster and when peace came, in the late '40's, Ed felt it was time for him to have a piece of the action. He sought a partnership with Francis but was in his late fifties and his sister wanted a younger man, someone who could "give the business new energy".

The two parted amicably. Francis offered her firm to a nephew, Adrian Sokoloff, and Harold's eventually grew to become 8 in 1 Pet Products. In 1950, at the age of 60, a time when most men think seriously of retiring, Ed Levey decided to start again.

With \$2500 borrowed from a local bank he organized what he then considered a distributorship that would not compete with Harold's. The new company, to be called Wardley (Ward from Edward and Ley from Levey) would handle bird cages and tropical fish products.

The early months were strictly a family performance. Ed was on the road, his wife, Birdie, answered the phone and his son Allan, worked in the office and shipping room. His son-in-law, Jack Wollman, came evenings to help with the books.

Ed toured the area he knew best, the south, selling his own products and pushing 8 in 1 in areas in which they had no representation. In 1952 he saw a growing market for fish foods and decided to add them.

A new line

Allan, who had been a science major at college, came in to formulate the products and soon Wardley had seven items, all fish foods and all in packages Allan still remembers.

"They were horrible," he recalls,



An early sales meeting. Allan Levey left, Edward Levey and Jack Wolman right. The others are unidentified salesmen.

"a bronze or gold label on a can that required a special opener. But we thought it was great and Dad sold gross after gross to his old customers."

Dried fish foods were new and Wardley's major competition came from a small Union City, New Jersey firm owned by a man named Fuchs. The product was called Longlife and old timers swore by it. But Ed was a good salesman, Wardley's was a good food and the new foods prospered.

The company expanded rapidly, moving to larger locations once every two years, jumping from a 750 square foot office in New York to a five story office building in Long Island city in just five years, finally moving to a 500,000 square foot factory in New Jersey, located aptly on Aquarium Drive.

Sales curves continued to move upward and Ed made two decisions which changed the direction of his firm. First, he decided to abandon wholesaling, concentrating instead on manufacturing. The move was considered dangerous since much of Wardley's current profits came from distribution, but within one year Wardley-made products more than absorbed the slack. At that point Ed decided his firm would henceforth primarily be concerned with aquarium foods.

Second, he decided to expand distribution, moving from regional sales to a national approach. In 1954 Ed Levey hit the windy city and signed Chicago distributor, M. P. Krause, as his first midwest wholesaler. Shortly after he came to California and landed John L. Sullivan in San Francisco. Sullivan was one of two distributors who later combined to form Pet Dealers, largest wholesalers

in the west.

In the same period the firm incorporated with Ed, Allan and Jack Wallman as partners. Allan would develop products, Jack would help manufacture them and Ed would sell. It was a routine that worked beautifully for more than ten years. Ten years in which Wardley added several new distributors and eventually expanded sales around the world.

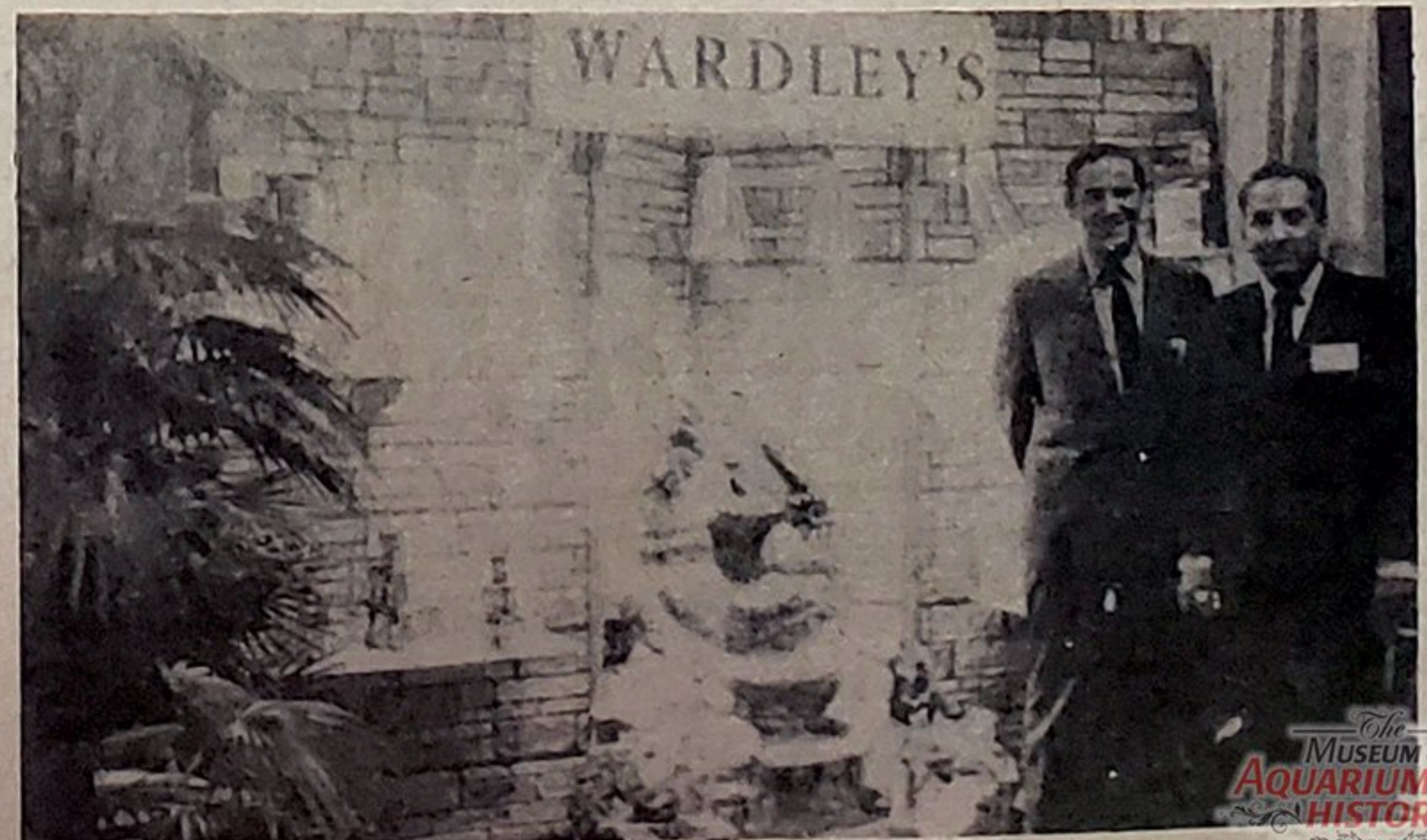
By 1965 Ed, now well into his seventies, decided to relax. Stanley Druce was hired as Sales Manager but Ed still called on occasional clients. He found it difficult to retire and was still working part-time when he died, May 21, 1967. His wife, Birdie, is now approaching her 80th birthday and is still going strong.

The best years

Recently, while reviewing company history for reporters, his son Allan recalled, "My father had a full life and while the first 60 years were good ones, he packed much of his best living into the last 17."

Perhaps more than anything that sentence sums up the life and times of Ed Levey. At an age when most men think of retiring, Ed thought nothing of starting over. He was an optimist and an innovator and in less than two decades the "old man" created a company whose products are known around the world.

More than 600 friends attended services when he died, snarling New York traffic for blocks and even now pioneer retailers in the south remember him as a "fantastic salesman". If in 77 years Ed Levey ever waited for anything it might have been for the last 17 years of his life, the time when he had an opportunity to prove how really good he was.



An early trade show booth with Allan Levey and Stanley Druce.