



Allan Willinger, Executive Vice President. In charge of product design and marketing.

For Allan and Harding Willinger its

Second Nature

The Willinger Brothers, known best for their active and busy years at Metaframe, are back in the saddle again.

By
Lee Edwards

NEW YORK, NY — What's in a name? The answer, of course, depends on your point of reference, but for anyone in the aquarium industry the name Willinger was once ubiquitous. It stands for Allan and Harding, two brothers who have contributed a fair share to the history of the industry.

The duo were among the first successful post-war accessory manufacturers with a firm initially known as Wil-Nes and subsequently as Metaframe and anyone not familiar with one or both names goes to the back of the class.

When Metaframe merged with Mattel several years ago the Willingers were sidelined by contractual agreements. Now they are back with new products, a new approach and a new company, and since the two are best known for a belief in the distributor system, quality and product integrity, that's news.

The return

There had been rumors in the trade for nearly a year that the Willingers were planning a dramatic return but their actual debut was made via a well-planned, visually-oriented booth at the Chicago PIDA show. That booth alone verified the fact that the men were again manufacturing rugged and well-designed aquarium products.

The PIDA show was the first unveiling of their new line which can be considered either as one product with eight variants or eight products closely related. Either way, the line is only a beginning, unified by an unusual company name, *Second Nature*, a handle that seems particularly well suited since the aquarium business has been home to the brothers for more than thirty years.

Their PIDA display unveiled a line

of aquarium air pumps, sold under the trade name of Whisper, and available in eight sizes, from a small version for 5½ gallon tanks to a powerhouse with twin outlets for set-ups of 100 gallons or more. A subsidiary line of repair parts and service modules completed the introduction.

As with earlier items, that is products designed for Wil-Nes and Metaframe, the air pumps are well planned and ruggedly made with at least three features most competition cannot offer. The first: a unique flap valve of silicone polymer, a material with superior life. The second: a rolling action to the valve which also increases its operating life. Third: a thicker plastic housing which muffles vibrator noises better.

Coupled with do-it-yourself repair kits the new products embody the basic Willinger philosophy — create a good product retailers can sell with confidence and add consumer conveniences that mean repeat sales.

Looking back

The philosophy probably dates to the 1930's when Allan, then 11 years old, became an aquarium hobbyist. As he grew he worked in various New York pet shops. After World War II, he and Harding went to college on the GI bill. To augment their meager subsistence checks the two decided to earn money by marketing an aquarium heater Allan had designed. Within one year the product was so successful the men dropped out of college to become busy manufacturers.

By 1948 they moved from a small apartment to become Wil-Nes (named for the Willingers and their cousins Harold and Herbert Nestler). The product line grew, moving from one heater to more than 50 accessories —

aquarium vacuum cleaners, pumps, breeding traps, and more — all products of the fertile mind of Allan.

In 1961 Wil-Nes, Gro-Wel and Metaframe merged retaining the Metaframe name. Harding became president and Allan was named Executive vice president in charge of product development and marketing. In 1969 Metaframe merged with Mattel and the remainder of the story is well known.

A strong comeback

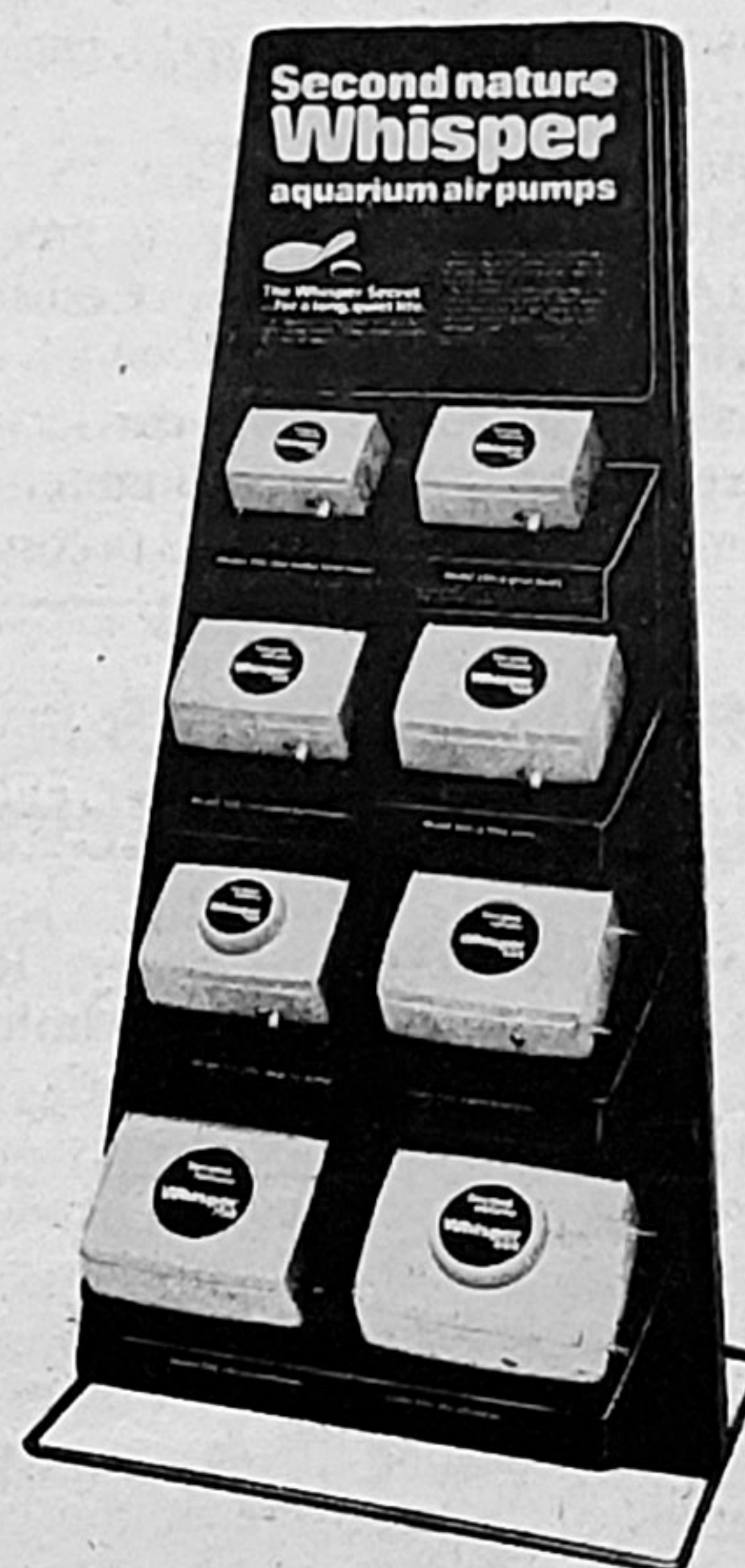
I talked with Harding Willinger recently to discover where *Second Nature* is going and in the give and take questions and answers uncovered a number of interesting facts.

I knew the men had signed a clause guaranteeing that neither would manufacture competing aquarium products until 1975, but why, I asked, had they come back at all? Weren't there other investment possibilities?

As Harding weighed his words he slowly explained that there had been too few innovative aquarium products in recent years and that he and Allan felt they could contribute new ideas to the field. They had chosen to begin with a pump, he said, because an air pump is basic to every tank.

The recent Chicago display, with the pumps Allan had envisioned, drew queries from many distributors, and by the time the three-day event was over the brothers had national distribution — a network of more than 100 distributors.

"That," Harding said, "more than anything else proved we were on the right track."



Whisper pump display.

Teamwork

The men have always worked as a team. Allan develops products and handles marketing while Harding helps with marketing and concentrates on business management. Harding, who at 50 is the older of the two, feels that Allan's engineering genius is basic to the firm's success. In the case of the Whisper pumps, Allan developed the basic idea, designed the product, supervised its transformation from model to production and worked on the unusual packaging.

Where is *Second Nature* heading? Shortly, Harding says, the firm will



One of eight pumps, the model 300. For tanks to 15 gallons.

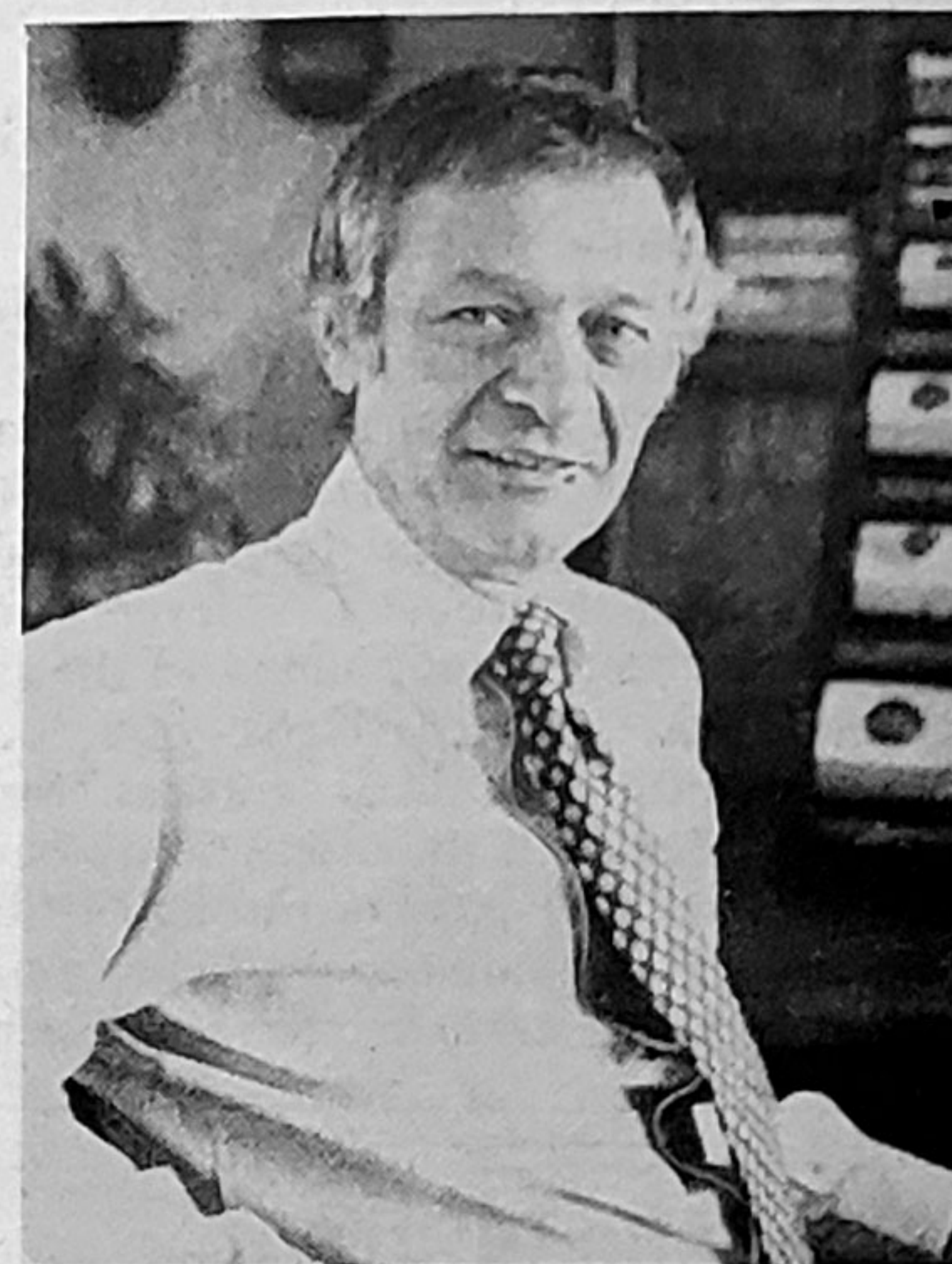
expand its line, introducing several related products. One will be a special pump and filter kit for goldfish. Another, perhaps more unusual, will be unveiled in June, about the time of the APPMA show.

Merchandising plans for the Whisper line will include point-of-purchase displays for both the eight-model pump line and Silaflex replacement modules. No consumer advertising is planned, neither in hobby publications nor other magazines, but the Willingers do propose a series of trade journal ads later in the year.

These could begin in September Harding says, and will be designed to support distributors. The series will be written to gain dealer interest and to spur retailer sales.

No matter how you look at it pumps and replacement parts are only a beginning. The Willingers have started with a single product before and have the energy to do it again. After all the aquarium business is *Second Nature* to them.

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Harding Willinger, President.

Bob Hall, In charge of finance.

