

My Life in the Pet Industry - Part 1

By Steve Feinberg

My name is Steve Feinberg. I spent 45 years working in the pet industry. It never really felt like work.

My involvement with pets started when I was 10 years old. My neighbor gave me a chrome and glass 10 gallon aquarium. Just the tank. I ran to Woolworths and bought a small, dark green air pump (the loudest pump ever made), a corner filter filled with glass wool and charcoal, and some tubing. I put some gravel from the road in the tank, filled it and plugged it in. I went back to Woolworths and bought some goldfish. Needless to say, I was not instantly successful.





Example of a metal frame tank by Ken Larimer. The above photographed tank is a Pemco aquarium.

I decided I should probably do some research to find out what went wrong. I set the tank up again, but this time with appropriate stuff. I added a stainless steel, incandescent strip light.

This time, I was much more successful.

Fast forward to fourteen years old. I now have 29 aquariums in the basement of the house. An air compressor runs the fish room. I even have a three tiered rack that holds 3 rows of 4 ten gallon tanks. I am doing most of my business with Tropiquarium. It's a small shop in Deer Park, New York. I live in North Babylon. It's about a fifteen minute bike ride.

Tropiquarium is run by Gladys and Charlie. It's a small shop. Not immaculately kept, but not offensive. They are both almost elderly. Charlie sits behind the counter and smokes cigars. Gladys usually catches my fish. But, I drive Charlie nuts with questions. He's sort of a gruff guy, but I think he actually enjoys my frequent company.

One day, in one of my tropical fish magazines, I saw a small add for mail order, Show quality guppies. The address and phone number were located in Deer Park, the next town over. The gentleman's name was Ron Ahlers. His wife's name is Tina. I called the number and Tina answered the phone. I told her I was a big hobbyist and maybe I could come buy some fish.

Ron got on the phone and said "Sure! Come on by". He gave me directions and my dad drove me over.

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GUPPIES**
by
RON and TINA AHLERS



**From International
Prize-Winning Strains**

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Blue-Greens, Subtle Variations of Both Colors in a fish that carries a spectacular high delta tail at maturity.

1 pair	2 pair	1 trio	2 trios
\$10.00	\$18.00	\$14.00	\$25.00

Red Tail Half Blacks, A solidly established strain, noted for its large size, and bright red delta tail.

1 pair	2 pair	1 trio	2 trios
\$12.50	\$22.00	\$18.00	\$32.00

No-odor micro-worm culture—add \$1.00 to fish order. Prices include Air-Mail Special Delivery.

Send check or money order to:

MID-ISLE AQUARIUM

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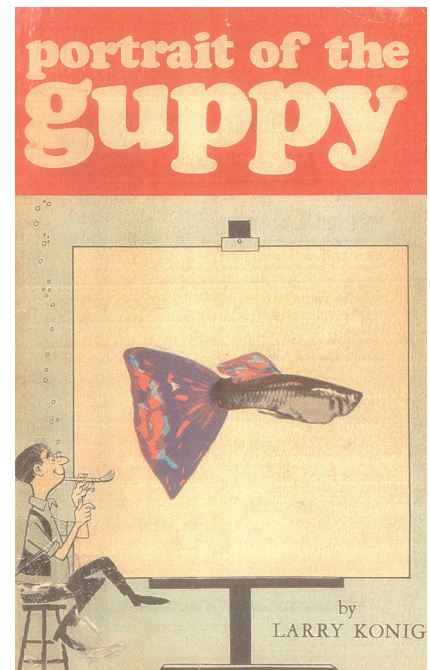
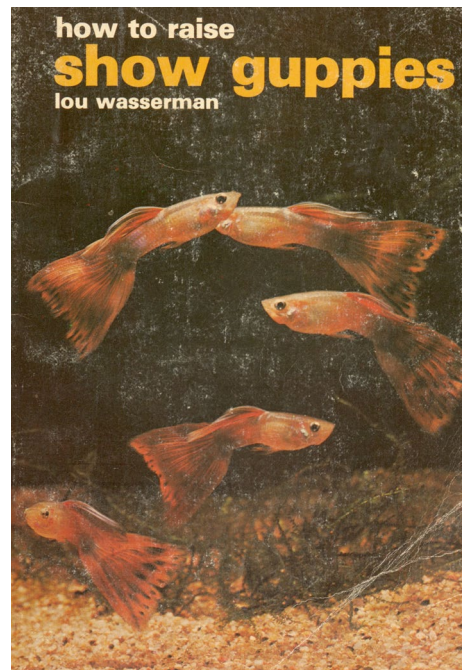
Live Delivery Guaranteed

Ron then mentioned that I said in my call that I wanted to buy some fish. I told him that I loved his fish, but it was a little out of my price range.

He brought me to the last tank in the last row. It was filled with a mix of all of the varieties I had just seen in the fish room. "These are my culls. These are fish that have a slight flaw that would not hold up in a show. You probably can't even tell what the flaw is. I'll sell you any fish in this tank for \$5 a pair". Then he said something I'll never forget. He said "I could easily give you these, but usually things that are free have no value". He wanted me to be invested in these. I bought a few pair and became friends with Ron and Tina Ahlers.

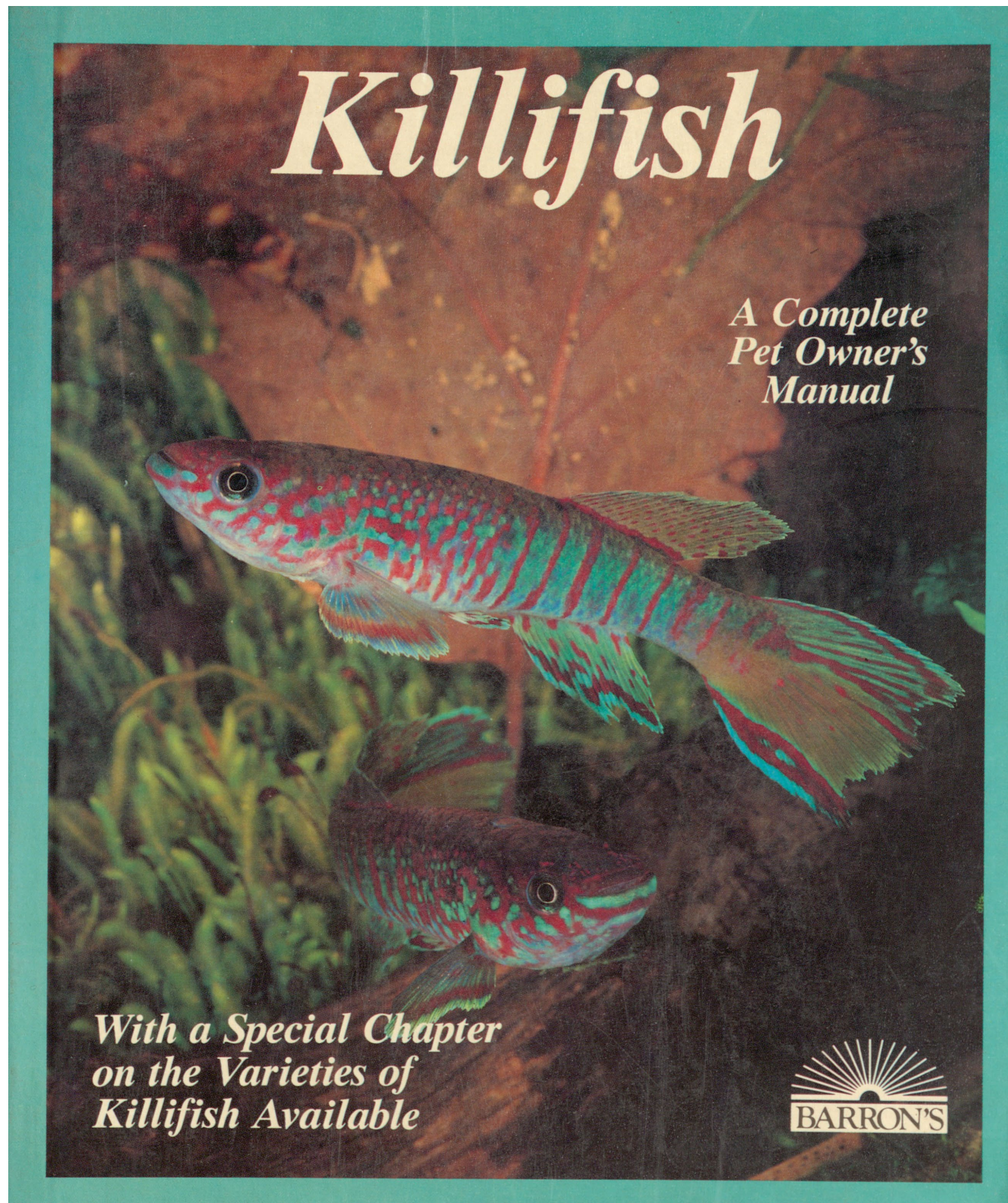
After a while, Ron asked if I would like to go to a meeting of the Long Island aquarium society. I got permission and couldn't wait to go. Ron told me there would be a "bowl show" at the meeting. A bowl show is where members bring a fish or pair to the meeting in a fish bowl. No gravel or decor, just the fish. I brought my Red-tailed Shark. I won the second place red ribbon. It was a nice, big ribbon.

One evening, the guest speaker was a gentleman who had a fish room full of a variety of killifishes. His name was Dave. A very nice man and well educated in aquariums. Most of the members were serious hobbyists. I was among some very smart people.



Photos of popular guppies from books published in the late 1960s through early 1980s.

The evening of Dave's lecture, I won a glass tube that held three killifish eggs that were close to hatching. I think they were Blue Gularis. I held the tube in my hand during the lecture and when I opened my hand when it ended, all three eggs had hatched! I have three Blue Gularis fry swimming in the tube.



A Blue Gularis killifish (*Fundulopanchax sjostedti*) is featured on the cover of this 1989 book.

I was active in the society and attended large shows. I usually helped Ron set up his entries. His fish room was lined with trophies and awards.

I was deep into the hobby. I made my parents chauffeur me around to various fish stores.

At the same time, I saw an ad for a tropical fish wholesaler located in Farmingdale. Farmingdale was only about a half hour away. It was called "George Demerest's Underwater World". I called and they put George on the phone. I asked if I could buy some fish from him, seeing as I had \$20 to spend. He laughed and invited me over.

Underwater World was a full scale wholesale tropical fish operation. Looking back, I'm guessing it at about 10,000 square feet. More fish than I'd ever seen in one place and more varieties.

At the time, the first hybrid Red Oscars came on the market. A 3-4" specimen could run \$100 in an aquarium shop. I came across a tankful. I stopped dead in my tracks. Apparently, Mr. Demerest saw me salivating and came over. I told him how amazed I was to see so many super expensive Red Oscars. He obviously knew how much I wanted one. He said, "Give me \$5 and pick one." I had a Red Oscar! All of my aquarium friends were jealous and offered me outrageous trade offers. I kept the Oscar.

I did spend the entire twenty dollars.

My first real job in the pet industry was in 1970. I was 17. I worked at a company called New York Aquarium and Pet Supply. The owner was named Ed Kovar. New York Aquarium and Pet Supply was an aquatic supply distributor in the New York tri-state area. They also had a fish room and sold tropical fish. They also had a small manufacturing facility called Crown Metal. They made stainless steel and glass aquariums with slate bottoms and wrought iron aquarium stands.

On top of it all, they also owned a fish store in the Bayshore Mall called Exotic Aquarium.

My job here was varied. I picked and packed dry goods orders. I stocked shelves with incoming product. I swept the aisles. On order days, I would come in early and work in the fish room to help filling fish orders going out that day and packing them. I loaded trucks and vans for delivery throughout New York, New Jersey or Connecticut. Usually, you could get six or seven stops with a van full of dry goods and boxes.

Then, I would go on delivery runs. I was able to see so many shops of all kinds. From stores located in shopping centers to shops set up in people's basements.

One evening, I was tasked with making a JFK fish pickup coming in late that evening from South America. I was to clear customs, bring the fish back to our facility fish room and put the fish away. I would unlock the building and have done this task many times.

Very late that night, I was in the fish room putting away various tetras, angelfish and assorted barbs when I came across the last four boxes. They each contained about 25 juvenile electric eels. As a hobbyist, I was excited to see them.

I found four large empty tanks in the bottom row and proceeded to acclimate the new arrivals to their respective tanks.

I finished up and headed home for a few hours sleep before I had to come back and start packing fish for that days delivery.


I was the first one at the fish room.






When I opened the door, I was greeted by the sight of 100 juvenile electric eels wriggling around on the wet, steamy floor. Luckily, because the fish room was always at 100% humidity and the floor was always wet and slippery, the eels survived and I was able to round them up and get them back in their tanks. This time, well covered.

A post note.. towards the end of my tenure with New York Aquarium and Pet Supply, we received our first shipment of the new O'Dell All-Glass Aquariums. The Crown Metal division soon closed down.

Eventually, when Mr. Kovar realized that I had some fish knowledge, they asked me to work at their Exotic Aquarium shop in Bayshore. I jumped at the chance. It was a busy shop and I sold lots of fish and supplies.

I was offered a new opportunity to work delivering live fish foods to local shops by a very nice man named Eugene Pacifico. I liked Gene and it meant less travel and more sleep. But, I never went to work for him.



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-  Famous for the MULTI-LINE of medications and aquarium products for the health and comfort of your fish.
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Ad for Ed's Tropical Aquarium from November, 1969 edition of *Tropical Fish Hobbyist*.

Instead, I was offered a job at Ed's Tropical Aquarium. Ed's was the Rolls Royce of aquarium shops. Seven stores throughout New York/New Jersey. Some were custom built buildings with stone fronts and angelfish shaped glass doors. Moonscapes ceilings with recessed lighting. Beautiful stores! I went to work at the flagship store in Lynbrook, New York. Ed's office and the warehouse were upstairs. The fish room that supplied the whole chain occupied the basement. I was in heaven.

I had applied at Ed's a few weeks before and I had an interview. At first, I didn't get the job. A few weeks later, I was called back for a second interview. During that interview, I asked why I wasn't hired on the first interview. A man named Danny Anderson was the interviewer and also Ed's right hand man. He told me that during the first interview when asked where I saw myself in five years, my answer was "Owning my own shop." Bad answer. However, I told Danny that was a dream for the future and right now, I would be an asset to the company. I was hired.

Again, I was placed at the flagship store in Lynbrook. That's where I had my first encounter with Frank Margiotta. Frank was the store manager. I didn't know it at the time, but Frank would turn out to be the best mentor I could possibly imagine.

Frank was a very tough and demanding boss. I was told on day one that I was on a 60 day probationary period. If I didn't meet Frank's expectations, I was history. Frank's expectations were that the job be done thoroughly and correctly. That included everything from maintaining the store to providing excellent customer service. He worked as hard as any of us and set a high bar for us. If he needed to counsel you or provide advice, he told you directly what was on his mind. I appreciated that. My biggest concern was disappointing Frank. I took a lot of what I learned from Frank with me during my career.

I dove right into the job. In the morning, we did maintenance on the tanks, fed the fish, checked everyone's health and waited on customers. Afternoons and weekends, we were so busy, customers had to take a number.

Funny story..one day, I had just received the fish shipment from the fish room downstairs. Sometimes, you were just replacing fish in depleted tanks. One tank already contained hundreds of neon tetras that were about the size of the lead in a pencil. Tiny! They were 10/\$1. I pulled a bag and found another few hundred to stock. We sold a lot of them, so I thought nothing of adding them to the tank. Frank came to find me a few minutes later and walked me over to the tank. He wanted to know why I put about 200 pencil lead sized Cardinal Tetras in with the Neons. I hadn't noticed. They have almost the exact same markings, except that with Neons, the red underbelly only goes from the tail to about midway up the belly. With Cardinal Tetras, the red extends all the way to the gill plate. There was now a virtual dense cloud of these tiny fish that looked almost identical swimming in every direction. Frank handed me a 3" net and told me to scoop out the Cardinals. You couldn't put the net in the water without a mix of about 20 or 30 fish swimming into it. Let alone try to separate them. I worked at it for a few minutes when Frank came by again. He laughed and told me to stop. They were both 10/\$1 so there was no financial reason to separate them. It was a lesson to pay attention. By the way, I never forgot how to tell the difference between Neons and Cardinals.



Neon Tetra (*Paracheirodon innesi*)



Cardinal Tetra (*Paracheirodon axelrodi*)

On day 60 (which I wasn't even thinking about) I was on my hands and knees picking the dead leaves off the aquatic plants on the bottom of the racks and rearranging them into neat rows when Frank walked by. He muttered "you can stay." We talked for a few minutes and I was officially a salesperson at Ed's.

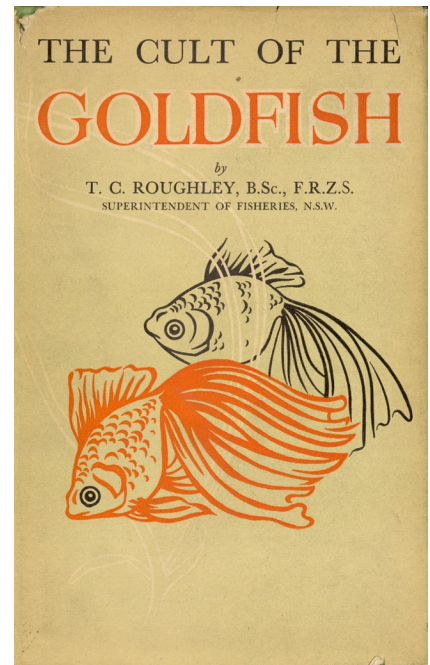
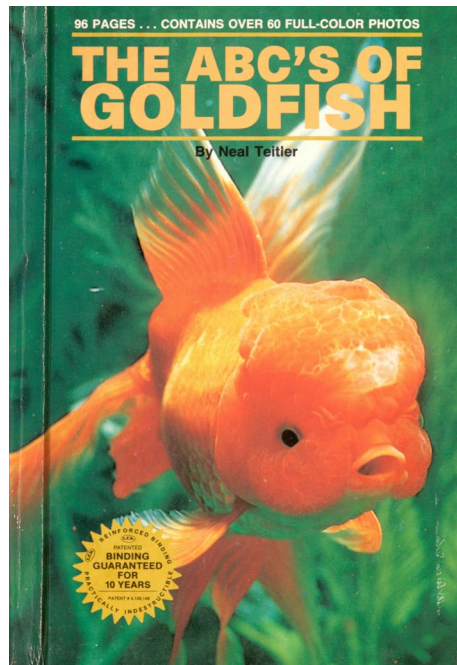
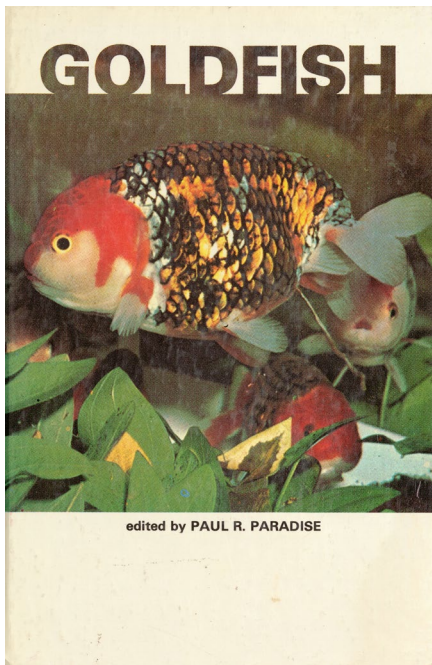
Ed had a few private label products way back then. We had three varieties of flake foods, an activated carbon, filter floss and a resin bag of pH stabilizer. It was called Ed's Multi Line. To encourage the sale of these products, Ed put a small spiff on each one we sold. I think it might have ranged from .25 to .50 depending on the product. There was a chart where you marked off what you sold.

At the end of my first month, I med Ed Sisco. Ed himself. I was working the floor when Ed walked up. He asked my name. I told him and he said he wanted to meet me. After many years in business with multiple stores and hundreds of employees, he noticed he approved the largest Multi product spiff check he ever saw. No one was getting out without a Multi product.

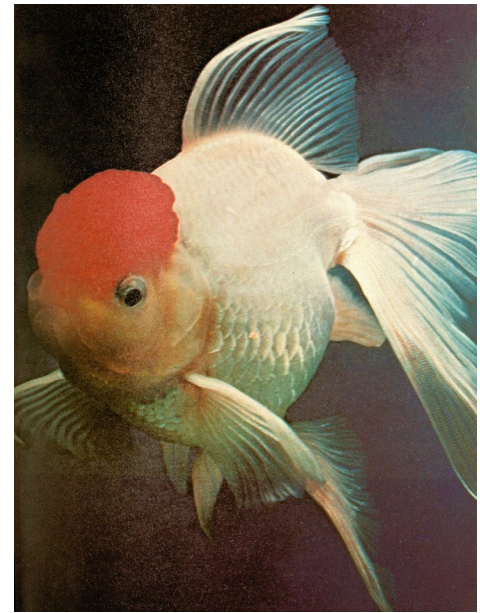
Ed and I exchanged pleasantries every morning after that when he came to his office.

I developed a special customer following at Ed's. One customer was a gentleman who resembled Marlon Brando in the Godfather. African Cichlids were just starting to arrive in the US and he was into them. The first arrivals could sell for as much as \$100 a pair. Money was no object. I would call him to let him know when the shipments were being unpacked and he'd come right over.

Another gentleman owned a local funeral home. All of the walls in his office were lined with tall 90 gallon custom aquariums, side by side. He was into exotic goldfish. We were getting some amazing goldfish out of China. When I called him to let him know when they arrived, he would show up with a big magnifying glass and examine every scale. He was a good customer.



Photos of fancy goldfish from books published in the late 1940s through early 1980s.



Photos from *The ABC's of Goldfish* by Neal Teitler.

Eventually, the commute to the Lynbrook store became difficult and I was asked if I would like to transfer to the store in Farmingdale. I transferred. The Farmingdale store was another beautiful, custom designed free-standing building.

I enjoyed working at the Farmingdale store.

At the time, in New York, they had Sunday Blue Laws. Most businesses had to close on Sundays and if you could be open, there were limits to what you could sell. The only eligible items at Ed's were magazines (no books) and food. No fish, no supplies. Ed asked how ridiculous it was that we could sell Playboy magazine, but not a bible. Ed hated that law. So, knowing I was in charge that coming Sunday at Farmingdale, he called and told that on this upcoming Sunday, he was going to defy the law and he wanted to operate at full capacity. I was on board.

We were probably open for about a half hour when two or three Nassau County police cars pulled into the parking lot. Four or five officers came into the store. We were cranking busy. A very agitated police sergeant asked who was in charge. I told him I was. He told me to get everyone out of the store. I made the announcement that we were being shut down and everyone had to leave immediately. When everyone was gone, I was told to lock up the store. I was taken by patrol car in the backseat. The sergeant was in the front passenger seat. He turned to me and asked how old I was. I told him "I'm 19." He said how sad it was that at 19, I would have a record. I told him I wasn't particularly concerned that my "record" would be for the crime of working on Sunday. He didn't take kindly to that. He told the other officer that when we got to the station, he wanted a full background check. His exact words were, "I even want to know if he's been caught fishing without a license."

I was working at the Ed's in the Roosevelt Field mall when the Blue Laws were repealed. My case was thrown out and Ed made sure my "record" was expunged.

It was 1975 and I needed a change in scenery. I flew to visit my brother in Florida. I had never been. One minute, I'm on the Belt Parkway in New York in major traffic, bouncing over potholes in the road during a rainy, sleeting storm. About four hours later, they roll the stairs up to the plane in sunny West Palm Beach, Florida. My brother was at the bottom of the stairs waiting for me. In those days, you could do that. It was probably 85 degrees. The palm trees were swaying. When I got to the bottom of the stairs, I told my brother "I'm moving here!" I spent a week, went back to New York and loaded everything I could fit in my 1963 Coral Pink Plymouth Belvedere station wagon and headed back to Stuart, Florida. I stayed with my brother and family.

I needed a job. I only had \$45 to my name.



Picture of 1963 Red Plymouth Belvedere Station Wagon.

Located not far away was Robert's Fish Farm in Palm City. Robert's had acres and acres of man-dug ponds with dirt roads and scrubby native vegetation between them. There was a small packing house.

My job was to climb into an old Volvo that had the roof and windshield cut off. The driver seat was walled off with steel panels and the rest of the car was made into a big, steel tub. The tub was filled with fish food. Early in the morning, I would drive up and down the dirt road aisles, stop at various locations and broadcast fish food from a big scoop across the surface of the ponds. I loved watching the feeding frenzy.

One day, at one of the most remote ponds, I noticed a bicycle tire in the weeds. I wondered how it got there. I went over to pick it up and to my surprise, it turned out to be a very large, curled up Indigo snake. Surprise!

In town, I noticed a sign in front of a building that said "Coming Soon, Stuart Pet Center." There was a young couple working inside. I went in and introduced myself and asked if they needed help. They did and I left my fish feeding job to help set up the store.

I decided that I needed a little more action than Stuart had to offer, so I decided to move to Fort Lauderdale. I applied for a job at Docktor Pet Centers and would spend the next four years working there.

End of Part 1. Watch for Part 2 in the May MOAPH monthly release.