

BETTAS

The First Hundred Years

1840 - 1940



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The
MUSEUM OF
AQUARIUM & PET
HISTORY

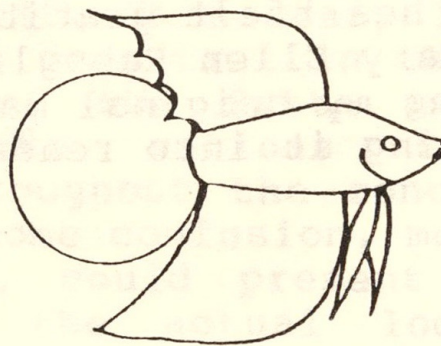
INTRODUCTION

Information on the history of the Betta is scattered and sketchy. The facts, legends and sources of information are few and far between.

I have tried to draw together as much knowledge as is available to me in order to produce this hobby publication in semi-chronological order.

Issued with a limited edition of 75 copies in June of 1985, incomplete as it may be, it is my hope that it may serve as a skeletal outline for reference by Betta hobbyists.

There is no bibliography attached; it would be illogical to include one, since the information has come from over a hundred different sources. Any additions or corrected information the reader may have will be gratefully received by the author.



This publication is
gratefully dedicated to

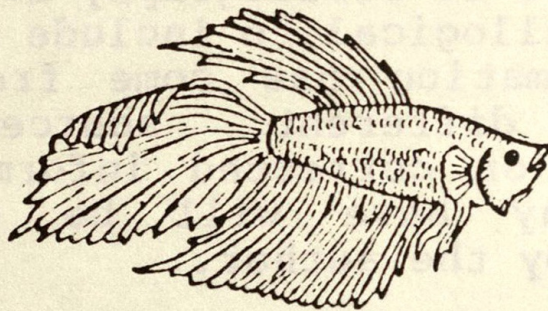
BETTA SPLENDENS

for introducing me to
such fine friends as:

Gene & Jo Anne Lucas

and

Vern & Cathy Owen



and

my heartfelt gratitude to
Mary Ellen Rabogliatti
for taking my original manuscript and
transcribing it into readable English.

BETTAS

The First Hundred Years

Oceanographers and geologists are agreed that in prehistoric times the land mass that incorporates Viet Nam, Siam and the Malay States on the Malay peninsula was at one time connected with the islands of Sumatra, Bangka, Billiton, Java and Borneo. It probably also included Bali. At the present time, the areas are covered by the China and Java seas. The narrow waters between the Malay peninsula and the isle of Sumatra are known as the Straits of Malacca.

The vast expanse of land, which is now innundated by the seas is known as the Sunda Shelf. This early land bridge connection is important in the story of the origin of the Betta because the fish, in its various types, are scattered throughout the zone. Without the theory, some confusion, more than we already have, could present itself in establishing the actual locations of these fish. Although many Bettas of one

type or another claim several of these islands as their home, there are some types that appear to be indigenous only to a particular island.

Betta trifasciata has been found on Sumatra, Biolligton and Java. *Betta fusca* has been collected in the Malay States, Borneo and Sumatra. *Betta anabantoides* has been located in Malay and also on Borneo. This would further solidify the Sunda Shelf theory. For the few that seem to be singular to one island or another we cannot be sure that this is indicative of isolation. Extensive research has not revealed further evidence of the Bettas because of the inaccessibility of some of the interior areas of such places as Borneo. There is, however, always the possibility that new reports of findings could be reported any day. Time will tell.

The principal, although not exclusive, areas for *Betta splendens* are Cambodia, Siam, Laos, Viet Nam and Sumatra. Who can really say that any particular variety is native to any certain section or not? After all they could have been introduced to the region by man with no recorded data on the activity.

The first mentions of the Betta were few and obscure in their origins, but the fish can be assumed to be from Thailand, where they were noted as being combatants in that country's early gambling on the outcome of piscatorial

battles between the males. They probably originated in the late 1700's or the very early 1800's.

Throughout the world there have been many forms of combat on which wagering has taken place, but betting on fish is not only the most dominant in Thailand but the idea of piscatorial combat also seems to have originated in that country.

In the major cities of Cambodia the staged Betta fights for gambling purposes were so plentiful that many of the natives made their living by obtaining mosquito larvae to fulfill the demands of the breeders. Some even set up actual mosquito raising areas where they would breed mosquitos to provide more larvae for their sales.

In 1840 the then reigning King of Siam presented several of his prize "biting fish" (Bettas) to a friend of Theodore Cantor who in turn gave them to Dr. Cantor.

Cantor, a doctor in the Bengal Medical Service, described the fish as follows: "The head is deep greenish olive; the abdomen blood red with the scales edged with black; the body with three black horizontal lines; the dorsal fin silvery greenish brown crossed with wavy black lines; the caudal fin rays a bright blood red edged with black; the caudal fin membranes golden green; the anal fin membranes a bright blood red shading into silvery green to blue; anal

fins rays being black; ventral fin membranes bright red to black; ventral fin rays black and the iris in the eyes a pale reddish golden with a bluish black spot in the center of the lower half." Cantor did state that both colors and fin length varied among his several specimens.

The first Betta to be described in print was in 1846. *Betta picta* was identified under the name *Panchax Pictum* by two Frenchmen named Valenciennes and Cuvier. This fish seemed to be native to the areas of Sumatra, Java and Singapore.

In 1849 Cantor published an article on what he called *Macropodus Pugnax*, but he was in error; it was actually *Betta picta*. He had improperly identified the fish as being the same as a related species that had already been given that name. *Betta picta* is a mouthbrooder that has been collected at Peneang (island in the district of Penang), Kuantan (near Payakumbuh), and Western Sumatra.

Only caught wild Bettas were used for fighting up to 1850. Eventually the demand for fighting fish became so great that domestic breeding began and became a business for the Cambodians who foresaw a new lucrative income.

Bleeker described *Betta anabantoides* and *Betta trifasciata* in 1850. This mouthbrooder has been collected in Sumatra, Kalimantan (Borneo) Singapore

and Biliton. Later imports of *Betta trifaciata* have been from Java and Ambarawa.

Pieter Bleeker was born July 10, 1819 at Zaandam, Holland. In 1842 he was a surgeon for the Dutch East India Army, and for the following 18 years he devoted a tremendous amount of time to collecting and studying the fish of the East Indies.

Bleeker published in excess of 500 papers on the fish of the area. His published "Atlas of East Indian Fishes," illustrated by fine color plates, remains today as a tribute to his magnificent work. Bleeker died January 24, 1878.

In 1850 Bleeker is credited with creating the generic term "Betta." Unconfirmed mentions appear stating that he adopted the Betta name from a legendary early warrior-like people known as the "Bettahs" in the East Indies area. Other reports claim that the name was taken from the Javanese name, "wader betta." Take your choice.

In 1884 Sauvage added *Betta bellica*.

One of first exports of Bettas was to France in 1893.

In 1893 Perugia added *Betta rubia* to the records. The native habitat seems to be at Lake Toba, Sumatra.

Bettas were first exported to Russia

in 1893. As with the imports to France these were short finned wild types.

In 1896 Herr P. Matte of Lankwitz, Germany bought some Bettas in Moscow, Russia. These fish had been reared in that country.

Although I have seen odd references about the introduction of Bettas to Germany in 1892 I have read nothing to verify it solidly. Arnold and Ahl, two well known German aquarists of the period, claimed that the first Bettas (small, short-finned wild types) were brought into Germany in 1896.

Dr. Ernest Ahl was a well known Ichthyologist and student of aquarium life who was born in Berlin, Germany in 1898. In 1921 he started as an assistant in the department of Ichthyology at the Zoologischen Museum in Berlin and later became director of that Museum's department of Ichthyology and Herpetology. Several well known species of aquarium fishes have been named by him. From 1927 to 1934 he was editor-in-chief of the German aquarium publication known as "Das Aquarium."

In 1896 a German professor, Herr Hilgendorf presented a paper on veiltail Bettas in Berlin, Germany.

Also in that year, an article appeared in the German press by an E. Stehr, titled "Spawning Bettas in Berlin."

Legend has it that the Cambodian variety was first found or developed in French Indo China in the year 1900.

The Siamese people referred to them as "Pla Kat Khmer." The "Pla Kat" seems to have meant "biting fish" and the "Khmer" was the ancient name of the country we now know as Cambodia.....thus Pla Kat Khmer.....Cambodian Biting Fish.

These "Cambodian Biting Fish" as well as other Bettas have proved a boon for the peoples of the far eastern countries in mosquito abatement. Based on the eating behavior of the fish he kept in his own tanks, Dr. Hugh M. Smith estimated that the average intake of mosquito larvae by each individual Betta was 10 to 15 thousand per year.

Dr. Hugh M. Smith served in the United States Fish Commission from 1886 to 1913, when he became the Fish Commissioner until 1922. In 1923 he accepted appointment as Advisor in Fisheries to the Siamese Government, in which capacity he served for 22 years before returning to the United States.

In 1905 Popta identified and named *Betta unimaculata*, which was described from several specimens obtained from the Bongon River in Northern Borneo, near Kalimantan. Further specimens have been taken from the Howang and Kajan rivers.

In 1909 C. Tate Regan, of the British Museum, corrected Cantor's earlier error

and then, because there was no name for the species, Regan named it BETTA SPLENDENS.

In the same year Regan was responsible for identifying Betta taeniata and Betta akarensis, classified from only one specimen which had been collected by Hose. The fish was taken from the Akar river on the island of Borneo. He added Betta macrothalmus, Betta fusca, and Betta faciata, which was identified from two specimens obtained by Iverson in Sumatra, Betta macrostoma, which Hose collected in Borneo and was only a single specimen, and Betta bleekeri.

Reports of the first imports of wild type Bettas into the United States are somewhat obscure, but the date appears to be around 1908. William T. Innes claimed that..... "in the early imports of the Betta Splendens the body was yellowish brown with several small black horizontal lines on the body. Under stress situations (close contact with another male) the fish seemed to darken in color and display metallic green scales. The ventril fins were red tipped in white."

I think we can safely assume the fish that Innes described were received somewhere around 1908. Reasoning behind this is that Innes began in the aquarium hobby in approximately 1907 or 1908 and became intrigued with the Betta very soon thereafter.

William T. Innes of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania climbed up the ladder of success from 1908 to the formation of his own printing firm. This firm was the world's first professional publishing organization devoted exclusively to aquarium literature. He was publisher of "The Aquarium," a monthly magazine. His "Exotic Aquarium Fishes," a full hardbound volume which was updated yearly proved for many years to be the amateur aquarist's "Bible" for identifying and raising tropical fish.

The years leading up to 1900 might easily be referred to as the "Asian Beginning Era." The first 25 years of the new century could be described as the "European Era," with special emphasis on Germany because of their recording activities on Bettas.

During this span of time the Germans were very prolific (compared to other countries) with their "semi-pro" publications on tropical fish with innumerable articles on the "Scheierkampffisches," which is their name for the veiltail fighting fish.

In 1903 Hans Steuve, an importer of tropical fish in Hamburg, Germany, got almost a dozen Bettas which a Paul Arnold purchased from the importer and listed his breeding experiences in an 1904 article titled "My Observations of Keeping and Breeding Fighting Fish."

The year 1908 saw the appearance of two interesting articles on the Bettas,

again in German publications. J. Oscar Braun presented his notes on the breeding of Bettas in his "About the Lovelife of the Fighting Fish," and Wilhelm Jaeger presented his article under the fascinating title of "On Going Blind and Getting Back Eyesight in Fighting Fish."

Possibly the first appearance of "Betta Rubra" was mentioned in 1909 by P. Rozymsky of Berlin, Germany.

The first albino Betta was reported in 1927 by a well established German aquarist, William Schreitmuller, who found it in a tank at a store owned by a Herr W. A. Glaschker, who was also a part time importer of tropicals. It is also reported that a former owner had been a Herr Scholl. It remains a little hazy as to which man imported the fish originally. Was it Scholl or Glaschker?... Probably of little real importance which. Schreitmuller had the Betta only for a short time. It was not bred against any other Betta, and finally ended up preserved in the Magdeburger Museum.

Since this first report there have been sporadic announcements of albinos appearing, and in all cases they have been regarding only single specimens. Although investigation on many of these "finds" have proven them false, many have been truly identified as actual albinos. Unfortunately there are few detailed reports of a semi-scientific nature regarding the methods of trying

to spawn them against other Bettas. The most complete report to come to the attention of the author was that of Mr. Gene Wolfshiemer, the well known west coast aquarist and Betta specialist, who located a pink eyed individual among his stock in 1953.

The year 1920 produced an article which had an extremely colorful description of the Bettas: "But the king of all tropical fish is the fighting fish Betta Splendens in the red and blue variations. No other fish has such beauty. The body is like brown velvet covered with emeralds. The eyes sparkle like emeralds. The body cover spreads like a ruff. The body moves like a wave. The pectoral fins are spread, the anal and dorsal fins are used for sailing and the caudal fin is like a big oar-blade. The fish seems to be fire and diamonds."

Before 1927 we have no tangible record of how well known or how widespread in the orient the long finned Bettas were.

1927 saw the first import of the long finned varieties into the United States. They were shipped by the well known wild animal procurer Frank Buck to a Frank Locke in the San Francisco area. Included in the shipment were several "cream colored" varieties which Lock assumed to be a new species. He supposedly named them "Betta cambodia" unaware that it was just another variety of Betta splendens.

There were two claims to the "first imported" title on cambodians. One magazine claimed that a Joseph Taubles of New York was the first, having received his shipment on July 19, 1927 but the fact that George S. Meyers received a wire from Locke on April 30, 1927 describing his shipment of cambodians pretty well ended the controversy.

The "Michaelis Report" of 1929 states that they already had veiltails in Germany in 1929.

In the same year an Otto Gneidig of Ridgefield Park claimed to have developed a veiltail red Betta and advertised in print the availability from him of "Veiltail Betta Rubras at \$10.00 a pair."

Show results in May, 1930, reported by "Aquatic Life" included Bettas among the prize winning entries.

In 1931 aquatic publications stepped up their reporting of several more Bettas winning in Aquarium shows in the U.S.

In April, 1931 "Aquatic Life" again listed Bettas as show winners in a Miami, Florida show. The same magazine in August, 1931 had a full page ad featuring Bettas of many colors, and the October, 1931 issue listed winning Bettas in a show in Pasadena, California, exhibited by a Charles

Howes.

Again "Aquatic Life" printed a full story on a San Diego, California Aquarium Society exhibit in the December, 1931 issue. This story included mention of Bettas, again from Chas. L. Howes of Los Angeles, California. (Charlie Howes and your author became very good friends later, serving together for several years in the 1950's on the board of the Southern California Aquarium Society which met in Los Angeles for many years.)

In 1933 De Beauford added *Betta ocellata* to the identified types.

Meyers came up with *Betta brederi* in 1935. Specimens were first imported to Germany from Java and Sumatra in the same year.

Dr. George Sprague Meyers was born in 1905, a native of Jersey City, New Jersey. An aquarist in his teens, he continued on to study Ichthyology under Eigenmann of Indiana University and Jordan of Leland Stanford University, both of whom were eminent Ichthyologists. After obtaining his degree in fish studies he joined the staff of the National Museum in Washington, D.C. in 1933 as assistant curator in charge of fishes. Most Ichthyologists have only an incidental interest in the aquarium hobby, but Meyers was the exception to the rule. He has been very well known in the amateur aquarium field and is recognized everywhere as an authority on

the classification and naming of
aquarium fishes.

In 1940 Herr added to our records
Betta balunga.

If for no other reason than the many
appearances of winning Bettas in shows
and several articles on Bettas appearing
in the very late 1920's and the early
1930's, Bettas, in the hands of
hobbyists in the United States, had
become very widespread by the end of the
'30's and well established as one of the
monarchs of the aquarium hobby.

The history of the Betta and the
hobby of Betta breeding from 1940 to the
present date is another book.....

