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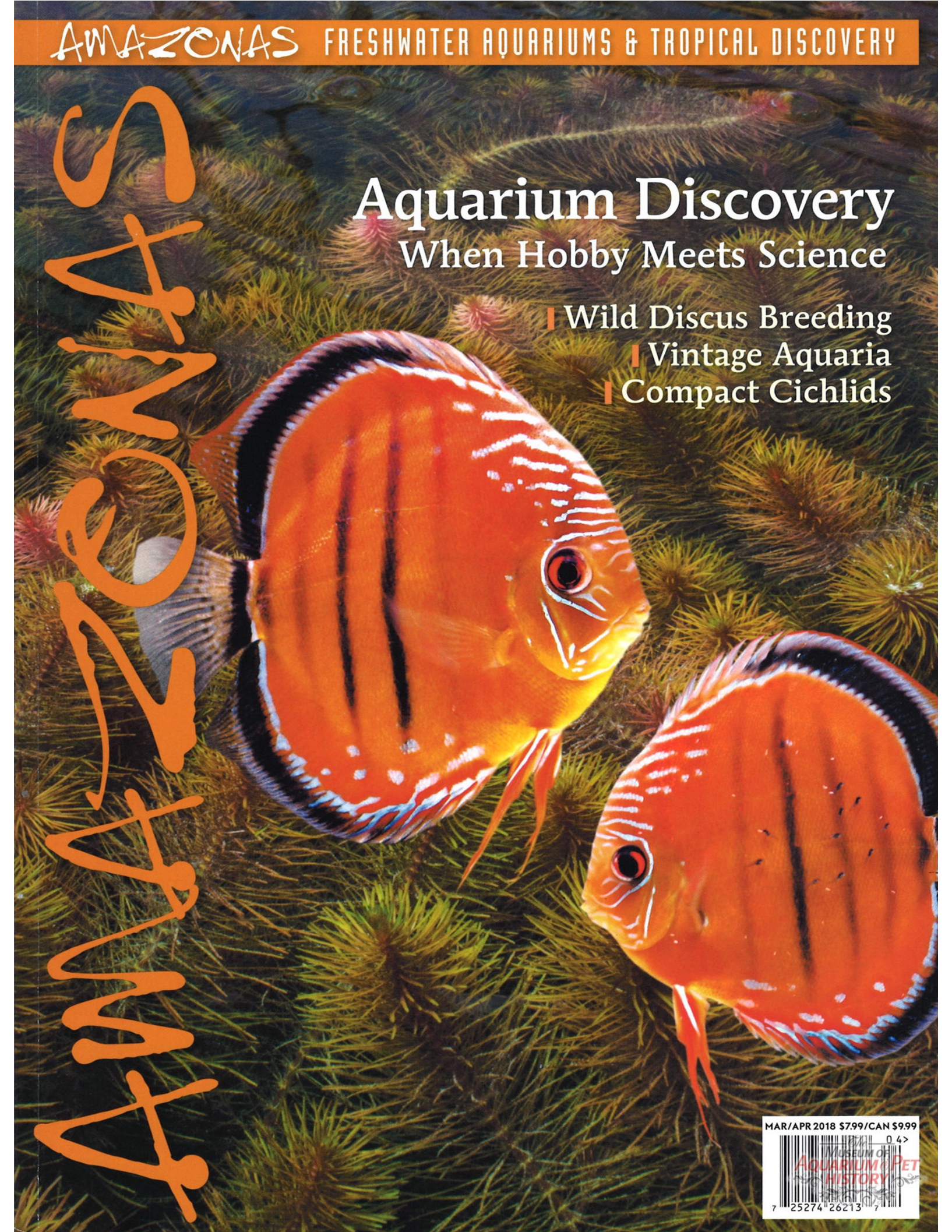

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MUSEUM OF AQUARIUM & PET HISTORY

# Vintage Aquariums

## *Antique tanks and prehistoric fishes: A love affair*

In celebration of Gary's June birthday month (turning 69), we have decided to re-release his article "Vintage Aquariums, Antique Tanks, and Prehistoric Fishes: A Love Affair." Updated June 2026 with new info on Jewel Aquarium and “Going forward today”.



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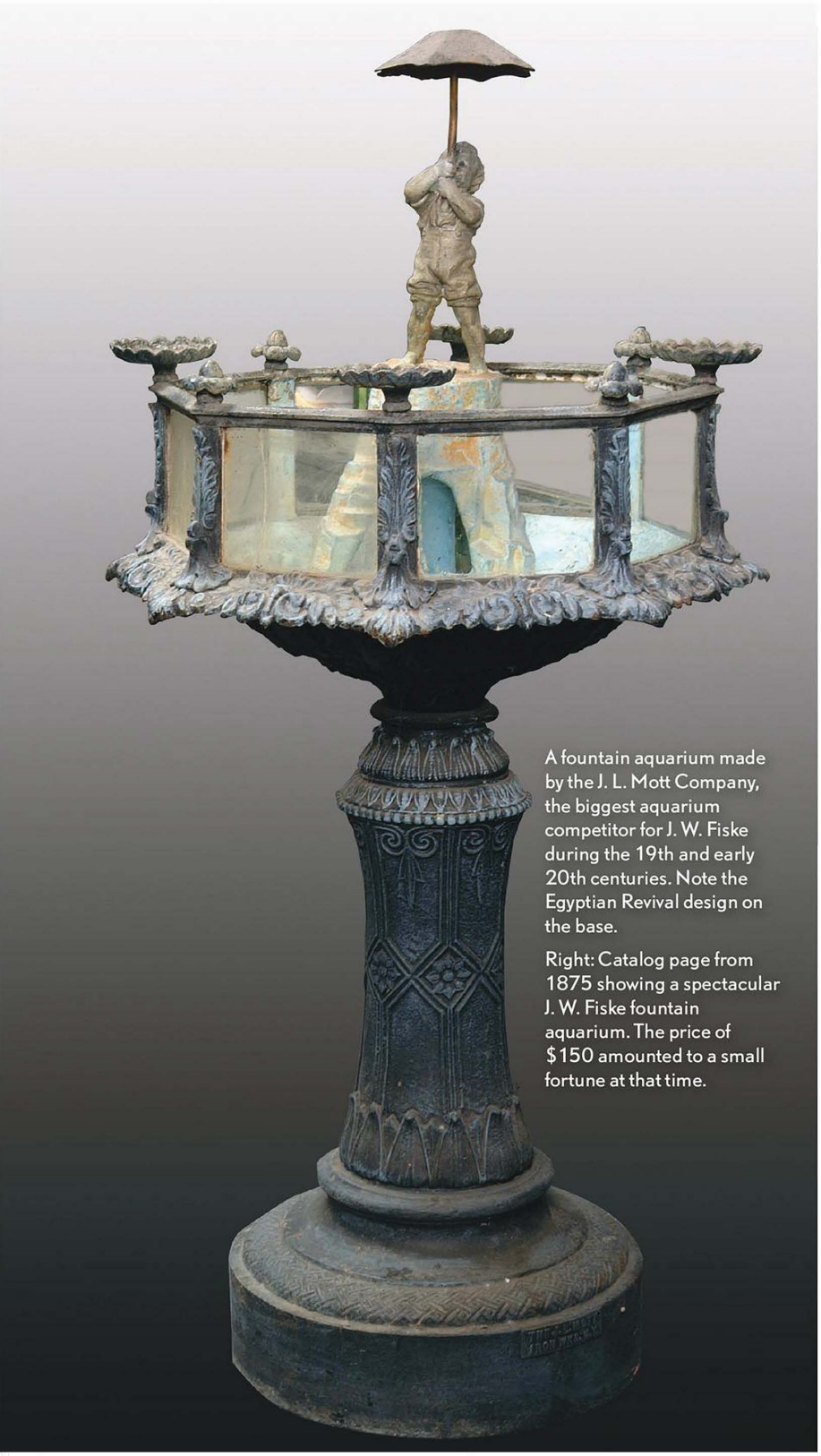
Above: Some of the largest and most spectacular antique aquariums I have ever come across are the giant Matson bronze aquariums made in 1915.

Below: In 1938 a fishing trawler in South Africa pulled up a fish that would turn the academic world on its head. The fish, a coelacanth, was believed to have become extinct over 65 million years before, so basically this was a "living dinosaur."

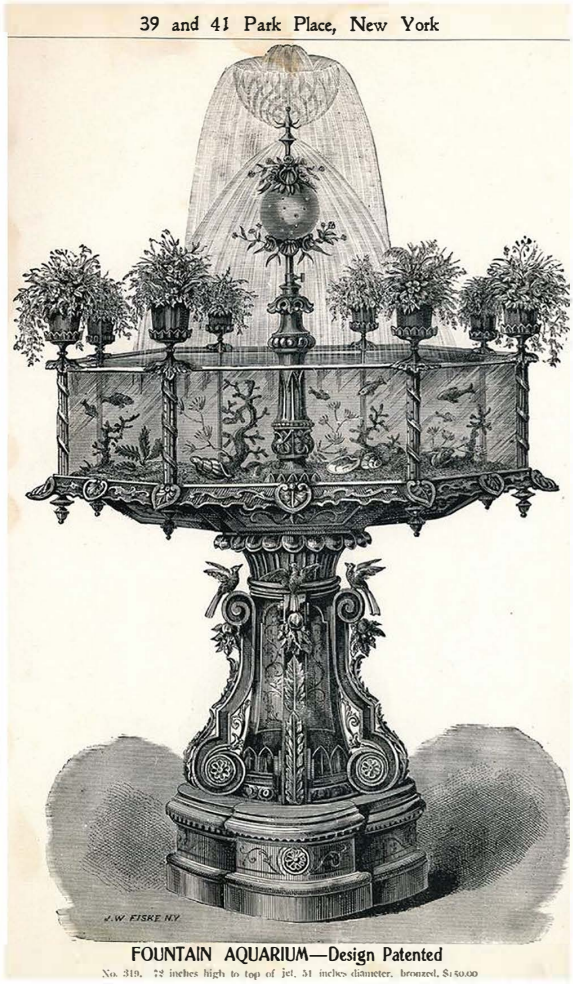
*Article & images by Gary Bagnall* • **High school can be a painful time in your life, especially if you are a shy tropical-fish nerd. My high school days were spent avoiding all social activities and hanging out in the library, where I could explore all the books on tropical fishes and pet-keeping. One day in particular stands out in my memory. I was in the library, thinking I had read or reviewed its entire collection of pet and fish books, and said to myself, "What am I going to look at today?" As fate would have it, I grabbed an encyclopedia (this was in 1968) and looked up the word "aquarium."**

I FOUND TWO PICTURES that have remained imprinted on my memory to this day: One was of a coelacanth (a prehistoric fish thought to be extinct for 65 million years, until they found a live one in 1938), and the second was a photo of a heavy-looking hexagonal aquarium made of cast iron that looked like it belonged outside in a garden or a greenhouse.

I was puzzled. What was this strange-looking, unique fish tank? How old was it, and what fishes did they keep in such a tank? Thus started my quest to collect anything and everything that had to do with antique aquariums and related aquarium or pet-keeping items. It would be more than 10 years before I found my first cast iron fountain aquarium, but in the meantime I collected several hundred more recent historical aquarium treasures, including double-tube aquarium heaters, air pumps made in tin coffee cans, and vintage 1930s to 1950s fish food containers.



A fountain aquarium made by the J. L. Mott Company, the biggest aquarium competitor for J. W. Fiske during the 19th and early 20th centuries. Note the Egyptian Revival design on the base.




Right: Catalog page from 1875 showing a spectacular J. W. Fiske fountain aquarium. The price of $150 amounted to a small fortune at that time.

Since this was "pre-eBay," I found the majority of them at antique stores, flea markets, and garage sales or got them from "old timers" at our local aquarium societies, who always wondered why I wanted this "old junk." Antique stores were always interesting; I would walk in and ask, "Do you have any antique aquariums?" The replies ranged from "no" or "they do not exist" (not true) to "you can purchase them at your local aquarium shop" (also not true) or "they are very rare, as most were lost to the metal drives during the last two World Wars" (absolutely true!).

But the day would come when I would find my very first cast iron fountain aquarium. I had flown to New Orleans on business and, during a break, I went down to the street in the French Quarters where all the antique shops were. I walked into M. S. Rau Antiques (opened in 1912, now run by third-generation owner Bill Rau) and asked if they had any cast iron fountain aquariums. I remember asking it this way, and not just "do you have any antique aquariums," as Louisiana is one of the main producers of cast iron in the United States. The owner looked at me and said, "Follow me," and we walked over to another street, where he opened a door to a storage area. We walked down a long row of cast iron fountains (not aquariums), and at the very end were two cast iron fountain aquariums, which he offered to sell for $300 each. I could only afford one at the time, so I purchased it and Rau shipped it to me weeks later—not in a wooden crate but in a giant cardboard box!



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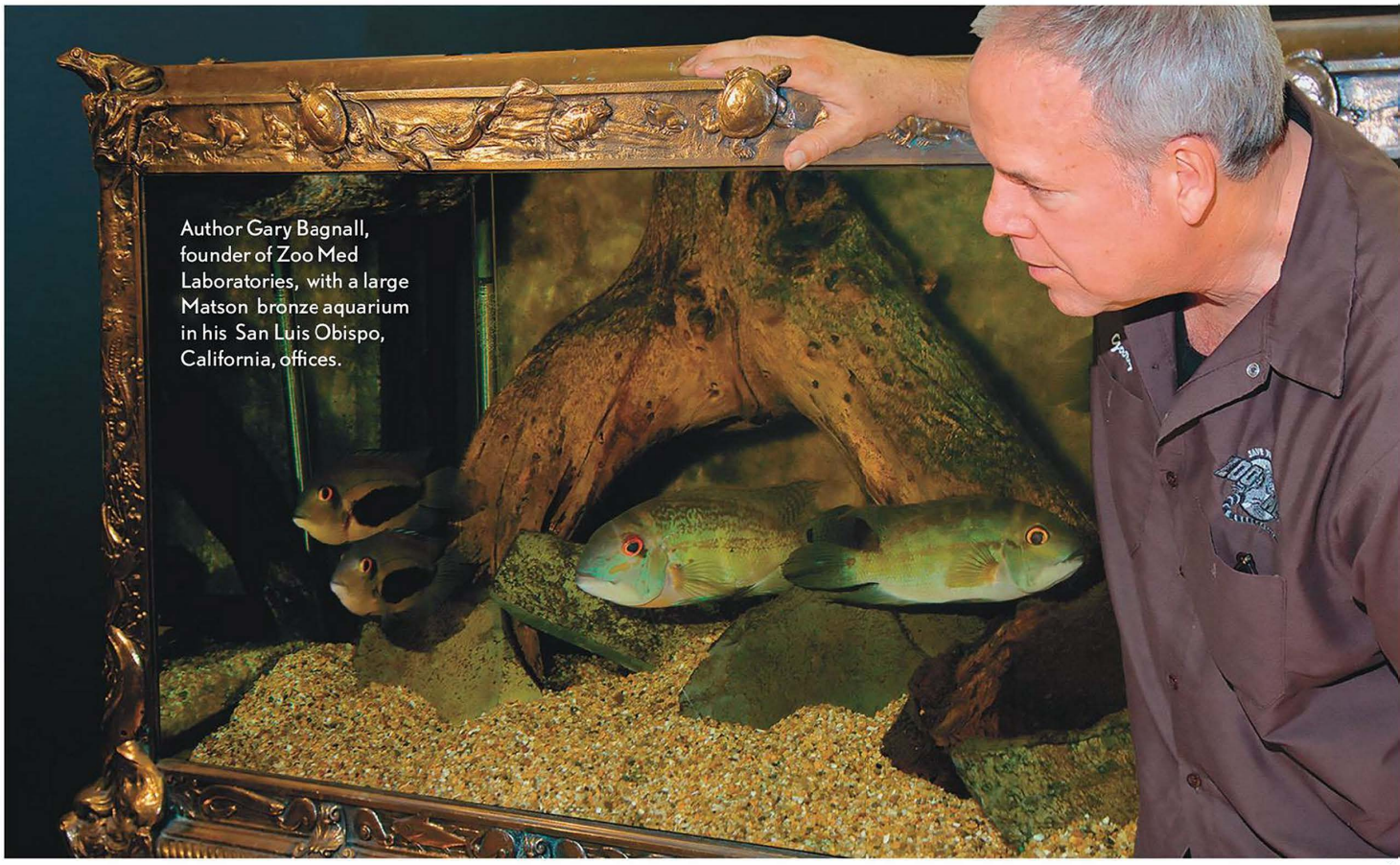

Author Gary Bagnall, founder of Zoo Med Laboratories, with a large Matson bronze aquarium in his San Luis Obispo, California, offices.

## The Iron Age of aquariums

There were hundreds of metal foundries in the United States in the later 1800s, and for most of them iron was the metal of choice. The U.S. had huge natural iron reserves, and iron was inexpensive and made for a very strong finished product. The foundries back then made decorative park benches, fences and gates, industrial piping and valves, and fountains. A very few—I'm thinking no more than 25 foundries—also made aquariums. The aquarium was a new invention at the time, but fishkeeping itself goes back over 1,000 years, when the Chinese kept Goldfish as pets in ceramic vases. Most books on aquariums published during Victorian times spoke of keeping Goldfish or native freshwater fishes, while the ones published in England mentioned keeping local native marine fishes! (I can only imagine that keeping marine fishes more than 150+ years ago [1860s] with virtually no equipment was a very short-lived hobby!)

The premier company making aquariums in Victorian times was the J. W. Fiske Company of New York, founded in 1862. Joe Fiske was a skilled patternmaker by trade, so he was an expert at aquarium design but did not own any of the two or three iron foundries that manufactured his aquariums and other products. Fiske also designed iron benches, urns, and fountains, as well as animals and weather vanes made of zinc. The most expensive Fiske item ever sold at auction was a weather vane that went for $250,000; the most expensive Fiske aquarium sold (to date) went to a movie producer in New York for $50,000.

Fiske's aquarium line consisted of rectangular aquariums and stands, fountain aquariums, parlor aquariums, and fishbowl stands. His fountain aquariums were spectacular, to say the least—the largest hexagonal model was 6 feet (2 m) in diameter. These fountain aquariums were also the most expensive in the Fiske product line, selling for as much as $150 each in the company's 1875 catalog. In today's money that would be the equivalent of over $4,500. Needless to say, only the wealthiest people could afford them.

Fiske's primary competitor was the J. L. Mott Iron Works (established 1828, Bronx, New York)—a huge company in comparison to Fiske. Unlike Fiske, Mott owned its own foundry and made the majority of the plumbing fixtures sold in America. They also produced a catalog of their aquarium products, and it's interesting to note that the Mott "Fountain Catalogue" sells for over $1,200 when it comes up for sale! J. L. Mott was eventually sold to the Kohler Company of Wisconsin.

Fiske also liked to use swans and egrets as decorative motifs on its fountain aquariums, while Mott used those birds and an Egyptian Revival motif that was very popular at the time. Before we leave the Victorian era and fountain aquariums, I would like to mention that I have found a couple of smaller examples of fountain aquariums from England made entirely out of zinc. Zinc is generally water resistant, but structurally it's not nearly as strong as iron. The other problem with zinc is that it is highly reactive and corrodes through the process of electrolysis when the necessary conditions (like water!)

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are present. This is why I think fountain aquariums from England are even harder to find than fountain aquariums from America. German aquarium catalogs from 1910–1920 picture many fountain aquariums that use cast iron for the base and zinc for the aquarium on top. I have owned two of these "hybrid" German fountain aquariums, both missing the aquarium part—it must have corroded via electrolysis with time.

These spectacular fountain aquariums lived in the gardens and conservatories of the rich and famous and housed mostly Goldfish or native minnows. The smaller versions, called parlor aquariums, as well as rectangular aquariums and some of the beautiful fishbowls made during this era, were designed to be kept inside the house.

## Art Deco fishbowls: highly collectible

The Art Deco period (1920s and 1930s) is my favorite time for aquariums. The aquariums and fishbowl stands made during this time were simply spectacular. Decorative ornamentation was added, and aquariums themselves were made in decorative shapes—for example, the Jewel Bungalow Aquarium, which is shaped like a house.

The most elaborate aquariums of this period were the floor model fishbowl stands made around 1928 that held "Vaseline glass" fishbowls that contained uranium and would "glow" green under ultraviolet light. Vaseline glass was popular for tableware and household items at the time because the uranium gave it a minor translucent glow, even without black light. Most of the fishbowls were yellow, but some were amber, green, or even blue. Some of them had odd shapes and included "waves" or flowers cast into the glass, so you can imagine that seeing your fishes through wavy, colored glass was not easy.

These fishbowls represented the manufacturers' efforts to create beautiful pieces of living "art" for the home. If you think about it, fishes live in ponds, streams, rivers, and oceans, and we usually view them from the top looking down (in the wild) and not through the side panel of an aquarium. (This is why some fish breeders prefer to breed their fishes in tubs—no side view—instead of aquariums; it's more natural.) When I started collecting these beautiful stands and bowls, it became apparent very soon that for every 10 stands I found I would find only one original bowl. This problem led me to believe that the design of this bowl made it difficult, if not impossible, to clean, so the majority of them broke over the years. In my ongoing quest to make replacement bowls I wound up spending over 10 years looking for a glassblower or company to make them and was always given the reply "no thanks."

Finally, as luck would have it, I stumbled upon a glass manufacturer in New York that had been in business since 1861 and was on its sixth generation of family-

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run ownership. The company was Gillinder Brothers, and they actually made most of the Vaseline fishbowls in the 1920s! Although Gillinder told me they had lost all their fishbowl molds in a fire, they still had the one 3-gallon canteen bowl mold that I (and all the other lonely fishbowl stands out there) needed. Gillinder did a small production run of 100 bowls in clear glass, as I did not want these bowls to be mistaken for the colored originals. Unfortunately, manufacturing these bowls is very difficult, and for every one they blew they broke three taking them out of the mold. Also, the bowls had a weak spot at the base. Gillinder decided they did not want this job and sold me the mold. I took it to another American glassworks company, but they had the same problem and told me "no more" after their first production run. I retired the mold and went to China, where I went through many factories before finding one with the ability to blow this difficult bowl. Today I supply most of the antique fishbowl stands out there with reproduction fishbowls via my website, www.moaph.org.

The most desirable and expensive Art Deco fishbowl and stand has to be the Ruba Rombic fishbowl, an angular Cubist bowl manufactured by Phoenix Glass in 1928. Reuben Haley created the Ruba Rombic glassware line for the Consolidated Lamp & Glass Company, which manufactured the entire Ruba Rombic line except the fishbowl, after visiting the 1925 Paris International Exposition of Modern Decorative and Industrial Arts. It is said he "interpreted the avant-garde spirit of Cubist paintings in the medium of mold-blown glass." The name Ruba Rombic comes from *ruba'i*, a Persian poetry genre, and "rhombic," a geometric form with no right angles. What most collectors don't know is that Phoenix made a smaller version of the Ruba Rombic bowl, designed to sit in a decorative polar bear holder. (I have only seen two of these in all my years of collecting.)

Art Deco collectors consider the large bowl and stand the Holy Grail, as it is estimated that fewer than 12 stands with bowls exist today. Recent auction prices show the bowl alone selling for $6,000–12,000; the bowl with stand sold for $15,000 at the latest auction. One of my good aquarium friends says the Ruba Rombic bowl and stand "looks like a giant ice cream cone" (although a very expensive one!).

## Jewel Aquariums

In 1906, a talented metalworker by the name of Hans Jensen started a machine shop that manufactured motors and locks in Chicago, Illinois. Hans was a tropical fish hobbyist at heart and held many board positions in the Chicago Aquarium Society. In 1925 he decided to start the manufacture of some of the most beautiful aquariums ever created. This was the start of Hans Jensen Manufacturing Co., the maker of Jewel Aquariums. Hans was an amazing craftsman and produced some of the finest aquariums, both in design and quality, in the world. The earliest Jewel catalog featured aquariums in an "industrial steampunk"

Opposite page: Parlor aquarium in the Zoo Med greenhouse. Middle: 1890s parlor aquarium with a cast iron base and zinc aquarium. Near left: 1920s Vaseline glass fishbowl and stand with scallop design in the fishbowl.

Right: A rare Ruba Rombic bowl and stand, the "Holy Grail" fishbowl and stand of the Art Deco era. The last one to sell at auction went for $15,000!

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Right: Jewel "Bungalow House" aquarium manufactured in the early 1930s.

Below: Classic early 1930s six-sided Jewel aquarium with dolphin sides, seahorse legs, and clamshell lights at the top. This is one of the 10 reproductions made by Sam Robbins in the 1990s. The original has a brass frame and smaller, more detailed dolphins.

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style, an aquarium on a stand with a birdcage, and an aquarium with a stained glass lightbox on each end. Jensen was not afraid to take a risk when it came to aquariums, and during the 1920s and 1930s he manufactured his famous "dolphin tank with seahorse legs," a "modern" aquarium with a modernistic stand; a bungalow house aquarium; and a rare crane aquarium. He also made a low-priced line of aluminum aquariums, complete store set-up stands and tanks, and custom show tanks for large installations like theatres, restaurants, zoos, and public aquariums. (Jewel made all the display aquariums in the Balanced Aquarium Room at the Shedd Aquarium, which the Shedd later tore down to enlarge the gift shop.)

Jensen loved what he did and it showed in his work. His heavy-handed "wrought iron stand" won awards and is a work of art, like many of the Jewel aquariums. There were six or fewer made of some of his large aquariums, like the dolphin, crane, and stained glass tanks, but around 300 of the bungalow and modern aquariums were made.

In 1937 Hans moved to Florida to open a tropical fish farm and his son, Carl, took over as the owner of the company. Carl led the company through the end of the Great Depression and into the 1960s, when it was then sold to Murray Schur. Carl also retired to Florida like his father and started a tropical fish farm. Sadly, a few years into his business Carl drowned on his farm. By then the company was making industrial metal frame aquariums for schools and laboratories with the fancy, decorative Jewel aquariums only a memory. Murray passed in away in 1981 and the company was taken over by his son, Neil, who ran it until 1987 when it was sold to Hubbard Scientific. With a little more research, I think we can conclude that the Jewel Aquarium Company was the last company in the United States to manufacture metal frame aquariums. In the 1970s a friend of mine went to the original Jewel location in Chicago and saw, in the back of the shop, a huge piece of glass that had "Coca Cola" sandblasted into it. Apparently this was a custom order for a 300-gallon (1,136-L) aquarium that was never finished.

I bought my first Jewel aquarium from one of my employees in the late 1970s for $700. He got it from a friend whose grandfather had owned a pet shop in New York. It was the Jewel Modern Aquarium model, and its beauty ignited my crazy passion to find more of these antique aquarium treasures. I am not the only one that loves Jewel aquariums—there are at least a dozen or so serious collectors out there. In fact, two of them reproduced the dolphin/seahorse Jewel aquarium in the 1990s. It's easy to tell the difference—the dolphins are taller and have less detail than those in the original castings, and the frame is made of plastic rather than brass.

## Castles & mermaids

Two of the items that go inside these beautiful aquariums and elevate the blood pressure of every serious aquarium collector are Victorian sewer tile castles and German-made mermaids. The castles were made mostly in Ohio, which was the center of the pottery world in the United States from Victorian times up until the 1940s. The material they were made of was the red clay used

Below: German mermaids and a bisque swan floater made in the 1920s.

Top row, left to right: First five mermaids and bisque floater with boy on back were made by Weiss, Kuhnert & Co. The last porcelain mermaid, on a starfish, was made by Sitzendorf Porcelain under the trade name "Ges. Gesch."

Middle row: Rare, large bisque mermaids marked "Bavaria" (probably by Sitzendorf Porcelain).

Bottom, front row: Rare baby mermaid in shell and large mermaid coming out of "lusterware" porcelain shell. Probably by Sitzendorf.

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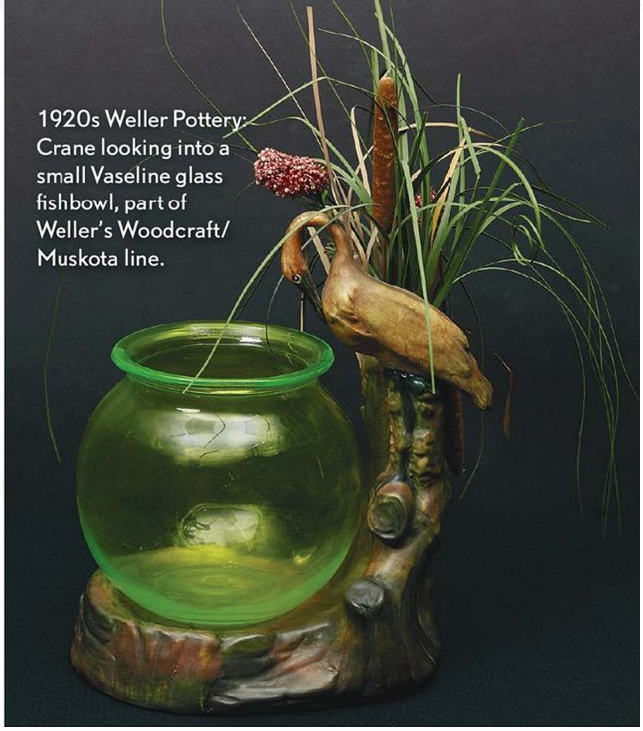

1920s Weller Pottery: Crane looking into a small Vaseline glass fishbowl, part of Weller's Woodcraft/ Muskota line.

to make sewer pipes back then, hence they called it "sewer tile." Even today, collectors call it the same thing because of its color and past usage. The castles came in sizes from 3 to 14 inches (7.6–35.6 cm) high, and many had a "grotto" on the bottom. One of the most famous makers was Anna Pottery in Illinois, and a recent discovery of one of these original large castles sold at auction for $12,650! Today a small castle or grotto by a lesser-known potter sells in the $75–150 range, while a large 12–14-inch (30–36-cm) castle can sell for as much as $1,500.

Alas, the most famous pottery makers were not in the U.S. but in Europe. A few German doll manufacturers decided they would make a range of "bisque" (unglazed porcelain) mermaids, which were quickly purchased and sold by aquarium and pet dealers worldwide. The paint detail on these mermaids and the delicate designs made them very collectible, and today the large ones marked "Bavaria" sell for $100 to $500. One of these companies even made bisque "floaters," which were delicate miniature swans, seagulls, and alligators that would float at the top of a Goldfish bowl. The rarest of the floaters is a large swan with a boy sitting on its back. I always wondered how they made these floaters, as pottery made in a slip-mold has an opening where they pour the clay mixture in. On the floaters there is no opening so they can float.

## Johann Maresch and the figurine fish bowl holder

To compare the figurine fish bowl holders made mostly in Europe to the ones made in the United States would be like comparing a Mercedes to a Yugo. In the United States, only one famous pottery manufacturer made a limited line of pottery fishbowl holders, and this was the famous Weller Pottery Works of Ohio. Weller made four models in their "Woodcraft/Muskota" line: a kingfisher, cat, and crane (all looking into a small fishbowl) and a fishing boy with his line and hook in the fishbowl. All of these were made in the 1920s and can be found at auctions today ranging in price from $300–500 if there are repairs to the pottery and up to $1,500 with no repairs and the original small Vaseline fishbowl included.

This is not to say that there were no other fishbowl holders made in the United States, it's just that most were made of plaster (called chalkware, which was a cheap and easy substitute for clay), cheaply painted, and sold for a low price. In Europe, on the other hand, many famous pottery houses, including Goldscheider, Schauer, and Johann Maresch, made figural ceramic fishbowl holders. Maresch produced the largest line by far, with approximately 20 different styles that included dogs, parrots, boys and girls, fishermen, and polar bears. My very favorite (which I have never found but have seen on a catalog sheet) is a man holding up a large net, and in the net sits the fishbowl! Many of these were very large pieces, easily 12 inches (30 cm) tall or more, but unfortunately, most were lost to the two World Wars. Most of these pieces dated from 1905 to 1926 and were made in Austria or Czechoslovakia. They are expensive, and if you are lucky enough to find one you will pay between $1,000 to $25,000.

## The "Modern Era"

As we leave the Art Deco period from the 1920s and 1930s we enter an interesting time in aquarium design. No more figural dolphins on the sides, no more beautiful Vaseline fishbowls, and no large figural pottery fishbowl holders. This was a "minimalist" time, in which "less was more" and straight lines ruled. The offerings included angle iron and stainless steel frame aquariums, chrome fishbowl holders (chrome was considered very modern), and really tacky chalkware fishbowl holders.

## Metaframe

Of all the metal frame aquarium manufacturers from the 1940s through the 1960s, Metaframe was the most successful. Originally the Metal Frame Aquarium Company of Maywood, New Jersey, it later changed its name to Metaframe, Inc. In the beginning Metaframe made angle iron aquariums, including an interesting small "Danio Breeding Tank" and a tank with a green or white "crackle finish" (collectors call it "splatter paint").

Later they would eliminate the angle iron tanks in favor of solid stainless steel tanks, which were very popular throughout the 1960s and early 1970s. In 1974 the Dow Corning Company introduced the use of their silicone rubber in the manufacture of aquariums, and the metal frame aquarium gave way to less costly all-glass aquariums. Metaframe, however, changed with the times and started to make all glass aquariums, as did about 20 other aquarium manufacturers throughout the United States. The Mattel Toy Company eventually



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bought out Metaframe, but only kept this business division alive for a few years before deciding to sell it to the Aqualogy Company. Aqualogy unfortunately got over their head with this purchase and wound up bankrupting the company in the 1970s. From there, the assets were sold mostly to the Rolf Hagen Company, with a few assets sold to Penn-Plax. Most of the Metaframe line is now but a memory, but the memory lives on with a separate "Metaframe Collectors Group" on Facebook!

### Fast forward to today/updated June 2026

My long-range dream was to write a book on the history of the aquarium, plus create a full museum devoted to the history of pet keeping. Although the book project has taken a back seat, the museum project went virtual starting 4 years ago in 2022. Today the Museum of Aquarium and Pet History has over:

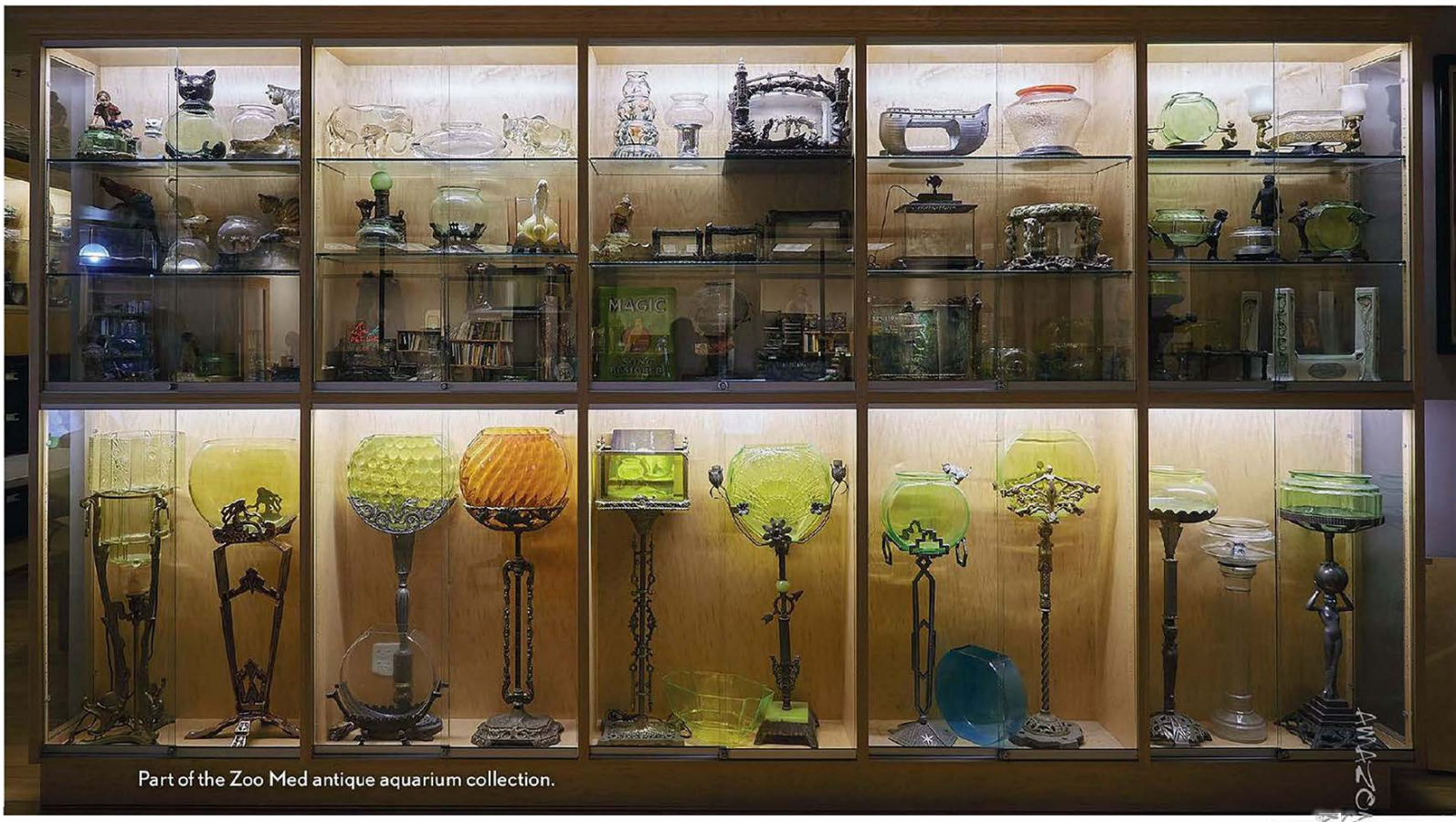
- 52 Long-Form YouTube Videos
- 134 5-Minute Videos
- 162 Main articles on dogs, cats, aquariums, birds, small mammals, and reptiles.
- 64 Historical articles on the same
- 147 Historic advertisements on pets
- 51 Pet Historical Images
- Plus historic pet films, vinyl records, letters, awards for pets, trade cards, a huge book and magazine library, and more!!

All of the above will come to an apex (hopefully) by the end of 2027 when we open our physical museum in San Luis Obispo, California. Yes, dreams can come true if you surround yourself with talented people and work hard! Stay tuned and make sure you follow the MOAPH website for updates.

In the meantime, the main office at Zoo Med has rows of display cases that house some of my collection. Many years ago I was at a large outside antique show and came upon a dealer who had lots of cast iron items, so I asked him, "Have you ever seen any antique aquariums?" He answered, "Have you ever seen one set up?" He explained to me how beautiful he thought they were and said that he had several antique aquariums at home that he could not part with. Antique aquariums (plus fishbowl stands and bowls) are not just antiques, but when set up they are "living pictures inside a beautiful antique frame."

One thing I realized on my journey of collecting these treasures was that they were like Tiffany collectibles—nobody wanted Tiffany pieces during the 1960s because they were considered "gaudy" or "garish." But fast-forward to today, and a Tiffany lamp will set you back between $50,000 to $500,000.! Antique aquariums are the "sleepers" of the antique world. They are still relatively inexpensive compared to similar cast iron or deco items, and especially items like Tiffany. If you ever thought of starting a collection or even having one in your home, now is the time to start hunting!

Author's Museum Site:
https://moaph.org



Part of the Zoo Med antique aquarium collection.