



Magnolia Bird Farm

An interview with Frank Miser Jr.

Author's Note

By Lyrae Perry

The short history that follows is not intended as an advertisement for Magnolia Bird Farm, but to give the readers a little background on the stores because they play such a major role in the daily lives of Frank Miser Jr., his family and the aviculturists and pet owners who depend on Magnolia Bird Farm for supplies and information.

The Magnolia Bird Farm was established in 1955 by Frank Miser Sr., and is celebrating its 55th year in business. The first store was a two-and-a-half-acre chicken ranch on the corner of Magnolia and Cerritos avenues, in Anaheim, Calif. The second store was built in 1988, and is located on Magnolia Avenue between Pierce and Buchanan in Riverside, Calif. It's owned and operated by Frank Jr. with his wife, Lori, and their children. It's a real family business and all of them are deeply involved in every aspect of aviculture.

The Riverside store hosts tours for school children. About 2,500–3,000 kids a year get to see and learn about birds. This is a unique experience for these kids, and it's only available at the bird farm because no school or zoo offers an equivalent opportunity. I always enjoy looking at the thank you notes and drawings by the children, posted on the bulletin board in the hall at the store. You can tell the children were inspired

and really paid attention by the detail in their drawings.

Approximately 300 Cal Poly Pomona and Mt. Sac veterinary students visit the bird farm each year to learn more about exotic birds. They get hands-on experience in general care, catching birds, clipping wings, feeding and housing during the program.

Visitors are encouraged to wander through the outdoor aviaries displaying the birds for sale, or look through the glass into the nursery and see the chicks being handfed. Young, handfed and fully weaned birds are often available to interact with near the nursery. There are several areas where visitors can get a close look at common and rare species. There are both aviary and pet birds on display. The staff is knowledgeable and friendly and willing to share information.

If you are new to birds, you can learn a lot by visiting this store. Not only will you get information on care, but also you can find out what species may be best suited for you and your family. Most pet stores don't have the large variety of species, or the experience to share with customers, which makes the Magnolia Bird Farm one-of-a-kind.

Aviculture is near and dear to Frank Jr.'s heart and he makes a special effort to cater to other breeders. His store is filled with just about every product you could ever need or want, including welded wire, special nesting materials, custom seed

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mixes for breeders, carriers, cages, nest boxes, perches...the list goes on and on. The Orange County store is still in operation, but most of the breeder business is focused at the Riverside store.

Introduction

The 1970s and '80s were very exciting times in American aviculture. Importers were bringing in a wonderful variety of bird species. Specialization in a genus or species was possible because aviculturists could get new, rare and unrelated stock, and for reasonable prices. Breeders were constantly looking for fresh ideas to successfully raise common and less common species. Also, those who had experience with breeding birds were sought out and in high demand as speakers for bird clubs.

Frank Miser Jr. had the benefit of growing up with a father who loved birds. Frank Jr. worked in his dad's store and learned the jobber side of the business, retail, pets and shipping. Frank Jr. also has firsthand experience working on a chicken ranch with 20,000 birds. Very few of us had that much exposure on all those levels of the bird business, and it's what makes Frank Jr. such a fantastic resource. He is always willing to share knowledge and his experience without hesitation. If you are serious about learning, he goes out of his way to help. He understands how important it is for breeders to get the right information.

There are many good bird clubs in Southern California, and Frank Jr. has been a speaker at all of them. My first exposure to Frank Jr. was when he spoke at The Valley of Paradise Bird Club in Redlands, Calif., sometime in the early '80s. His track record as a budgie specialist was well established at that point and everyone in birds was eager to see his slide show on the construction of his three new budgie buildings. Many were inspired by his presentation, and copied his ideas. The new buildings housed lots of birds, but more importantly, they were built to make daily and long-term maintenance easier and improve production. This was innovative and critical information for so many breeders because there were many new species coming out of quarantine that had not been bred in captivity. In addition, there were many new breeders who didn't have a clue about building proper flights or fulfilling the most basic needs of their birds. Frank Jr. has firsthand experience breeding numerous species of birds, not just parrots.

LYRAE: How did you get started in birds/aviculture?

FRANK JR.: Dad worked for the railroad as a switchman. He began in birds as a breeder and a jobber in 1955. He was working six days a week for the railroad and one day

a week on birds. Over time he got down to working just one day a week at the railroad and five days working the birds. Dad finally quit the railroad. He told them he didn't have time for the railroad because he was buying, selling and spending time playing with his birds. "Spending time playing with my birds" was his way of saying how much he loved what he was doing. I grew up with birds and the bird business, and when I was nine, I was raising budgies, lovebirds and Zebra finches, which I sold to dad. There was a guy building the Haunted Mansion and Pirates of the Caribbean at Disneyland, and he had some extra wood that was free. My first aviaries were built from that free wood. The first aviaries had doors that were only four and a half feet tall, and they got taller as I grew. Gradually I collected and raised the rarer birds. I remember when the first lutino cockatiels in Europe cost \$800-\$1000 each. Dave West imported many of the new and rare mutations, including lutino cockatiels.

LYRAE: Raising birds is hard enough, and most aviculturists have had to deal with a lot of criticism from family and friends. Talk to us about the impact of family versus your passion for raising birds.

FRANK JR.: I know some people have that problem, but I was lucky, I never had much of a problem because my dad loved birds and I grew up with them. Lori started working for Dad at the Anaheim store and that's where we met. She knew what was involved in keeping and breeding birds, and running a store. Lori knew exactly what she was getting into by marrying me! (laughs) Our whole family is still very involved with birds.

LYRAE: What is your favorite bird species?

FRANK JR.: My favorite birds are the ones I'm putting in the box and selling! (laughs) I bought my first car with the money I earned from selling my budgies.

I worked for my dad from 1970 to 1986 picking up and delivering birds. I had a regular route in those days. It's a funny thing, but each farm's birds had a distinctive smell. I could tell you exactly where any of the birds came from just by their smell. Each farm produced birds that had a certain look, too. There were no English 'keets or crosses in those days. Breeding mutation colors back to normal (wild-type green) is important to have good stock. I saved my money and specifically bought my starter breeding stock from Mr. Dowser in Garden Grove. I knew all the breeders and his birds had all the qualities I was looking for. As for my favorite birds, after you boil it all down, I guess I'd have to say that budgies are my favorite.

LYRAE: How many budgies were you raising in those days?

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FRANK JR.: During the 1970s I had three buildings, and the average was 10,000–12,000 babies a year. In the best year, there were 12,500 babies. Baby budgies had to be banded by law, and just the volume of birds made it a lot of work, but I loved it.

LYRAE: What are your favorite aspects of aviculture?

FRANK JR.: I love to raise, buy and sell birds. I don't really like to talk about pet birds. I'm interested in breeding and learning about other birds. I liked going to the bird clubs 20–25 years ago when there were lots of guest speakers talking about raising birds and aviculture in general. There were so many good speakers, all raising different species. In the 1980s people started showcasing birds and aviaries. Jerry Schulman built the Behavioral Institute. Cages and birds were up off the ground. Dale Thompson talked about bacteria, pathogen protection and breeding birds. He took some of the best pictures of birds too. Ralph Smith with Neophemas, Dave West with mutations, Bernard Roer, who raised practically every difficult species, Gene Hall with Rosellas and doves, Mickey Ollson, Francis Billie, Herman Heuer with Zebra Finches, just to name a few.

LYRAE: Who are the people you would like to thank (living or dead) for helping you learn about birds or the business?



FRANK JR.: Besides my dad? There are very few people who are still around that I can just pick up the phone and talk to, who really understand and can relate to what I'm talking about, and all the things a bird business has to deal with. Joe Bracken is one of those people. I don't have to explain every detail when I talk to him—he's been around a long time and he understands. We still call each other about once a month to talk about the business and what's going on. I'd also like to thank Paul Schneider and Francis Billie, who got me incubators and unusual birds. Francis Billie was a "go-to" man for unusual birds or getting an odd bird to complete a pair.

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Frank Miser, Jr. & Shane Hancock

Francis worked for dad for a number of years and he used to put on a big display at the Pomona Fair every year. Gene Hall is another person I'd like to thank. He answered a lot of questions and was very helpful over the years. (*Editor's note: Paul Schneider and Francis Billie were part of the "old guard" and are now deceased.*)

LYRAE: I know you were involved in birds when quarantine was still open. Talk to us about those days and your experiences.

FRANK JR.: Up until the late 1960s, there was no quarantine. If you wanted some birds from Africa, you just called

someone and made arrangements for the birds to be shipped to the USA. At its peak, there were about 18–22 quarantine stations. I dealt with most of them and was the only person who was trusted to catch and count my own birds out of quarantine stations.

From 1971–74 there was an outbreak of Exotic Newcastle disease (VVD) and the U.S. poultry industry made sure that importation grinded to a halt. (*Please see history of outbreaks in Watchbird XXXVI, No. 4, page 42.*) Thousands of domestic chickens and exotic birds were euthanized to try to eradicate the disease. We were all scared that our birds would be killed, because there was no testing first, they just assumed parrots were infected. My dad stood up against the destruction at our bird farm. People found out they had the right to refuse entry of anyone who intended to destroy their birds without good cause. That was the start of AFA, when breeders banded together to protect the birds.

LYRAE: Do you think the "close" of quarantine/importation was a good thing? Why or why not?

FRANK JR.: For good or bad, birds are a commodity. There will always be unscrupulous types who take advantage of a situation whether quarantine is open or not. We should still be allowed to sell and ship domestically raised birds freely.

(*Author's note: Quarantine is not completely closed even*

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though it is often referred to that way by many of us old folks in the bird business. This is because at its height in the U.S., it was possible to import and quarantine wild-caught birds—predominantly parrots, from many countries all over the world. Today, the only wild-caught birds imported and going through the U.S. federal quarantine process are mostly finches and softbills. The only wild-caught parrot allowed is the African Ring-necked Parakeet (Psittacula k. krameri). It's still possible to import other species of domestically raised parrots with proper certification through cooperative breeding programs, but this is not an easy process. These birds would only originate from breeders in the UK, Europe, Africa and a few other countries. The birds to be imported must prove that they are part of a structured captive breeding program, F-2 generation or higher, close banded, and with solid written records.)

LYRAE: What is aviculture to you?

FRANK JR.: The business of aviculture is to raise, buy, sell, breed birds for others (aviculturists) or for pets, and equip people with as much information as possible to care for their birds properly and keep them healthy. Birds are beyond my life—they are in my soul. If you go into the birds for the money, you are going to be in trouble. You want to do it because you love the birds.

LYRAE: What is your specialty or niche?

FRANK JR.: The focus has changed over the years. When

I worked for dad, we bought and sold birds from quarantine and other bird breeders. A large percentage of our customers were breeders. We used to have a mailer that went out to 500-plus people with our Buy list. This started in the late '80s and we sent out that mailer on a monthly basis. Over the past 30 years the list (of people) got smaller and smaller. The Orange County and Riverside stores used to mail 300 Sell lists to other stores across the country, but now it's more like 50 stores. Today the focus is on customers who want pets. They're the ones who have the money to spend, and it's changed the bird business.

LYRAE: Let's talk about the role of private aviculture and zoos.

FRANK JR.: There seems to be a line between the zoos and private aviculture. Zoos are up against public opinion and regulations of every kind. All the regulations add expense and time. Zoos changed their focus to making money.

Public vs. Private Aviculture

Frank and I continued speaking about differences of the zoo mentality of 20–30 years ago vs. private aviculture. Below is a brief synopsis of that time period and the changes.

In earlier years, there was no CITES (Committee on International Trade of Endangered Species), and zoos for the most part had a free pass to get just about any species of birds they

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“The business of aviculture is to raise, buy, sell, breed birds for others, or for pets, and equip people with as much information as possible to care for their birds properly and keep them healthy. Birds are beyond my life—they are in my soul. If you go into the birds for the money, you are going to be in trouble. You want to do it because you love the birds.”

Frank Miser Jr.

desired. Birds were essentially warehoused and displayed for the public. Breeding was discouraged because maintaining extra animals is time consuming and costly. Most zoos are publicly owned and therefore have limited budgets, and a board of directors to answer to, not to mention the public. What was kept and displayed was often driven by public demand. Specifically breeding birds to create a self-sustaining population was not commonplace in zoos in those days. The concept of a self-sustaining breeding collection was a response in the 1970s and 1980s as it became more difficult to procure birds after the VVND outbreaks, and with the advent of CITES. Zoos were refurbished and rebuilt to reflect the changing attitudes of the times. Animals and birds were provided with enclosures that were more natural and zoos put more emphasis on breeding from their stock and trading with other zoos.

The process and paperwork to get a bird in or out of a zoo takes six months to a year or more. Even with that long process, lots of birds were sold or traded within the zoo community. Trading or buying with the private sector was uncommon or nonexistent. Still, the zoos wanted much of what the private sector had and vice versa. The private sector wanted very much to work with the zoos. Unfortunately there was a good deal of prejudice that prevented most zoos from even speaking to individual aviculturists on the subject of trading or buying birds from each other. For the most part, zoos didn't believe that individual aviculturists were knowledgeable enough to be taken seriously, and that their stock might be sick or inferior in some way as a result. Many private aviculturists felt that zoos were insulated from reality, and playing “dog in the manger,” because they were wasting a valuable resource by warehousing collections that would only age and die. There was some truth on both sides...but neither was 100 percent correct about the other.

Some forward thinking zoo curators did work toward creating self-sustaining collections because it was easier to improve their zoo collections by trading stock. Decades of breeding birds with a severely limited gene pool, eventually

reduces the size of the birds and ultimately affects the health as well. Breeding and maintaining stock is costly and time consuming. As funds rise and fall for public institutions, the zoos were often forced to reduce their staff and breeding birds.

During the '70s and '80s there were also a few bird curators around the country, like (Kenton) “K.C.” Lint, curator of birds for the San Diego Zoo. K.C. maintained a private collection of birds. K.C. was eccentric in many ways, but made efforts to collaborate and share information with private aviculturists in his later years. K.C. understood how critically small the gene pool was for certain species, and that it would become even smaller over time after the close of quarantine. He also knew that there were lots of serious private aviculturists who were not constrained by money, time or labor who had knowledge and experience with birds—and this information was best shared for the benefit of the birds. K.C. understood that collaboration was the best way for both sides to maintain healthy breeding collections for the future.

The San Diego Zoo was quite progressive by the late 1970s and opened the door just a bit to private breeders. A select number of private aviculturists were allowed to purchase excess birds. The private sector was excited at the possibilities for future cooperation with zoos everywhere. Although no great strides were made in this area for the long term, there are still some cooperative efforts by a few zoos with the private sector even today.

LYRAE: Do you think there is a future for aviculture? And how might we get new and younger people involved in aviculture?

FRANKJR.: There will definitely be changes! I hate to be a pessimist, but I don't think some things will get any better. AFA is going to have to be more visible. People can literally be out of business with the stroke of a pen. We've got to keep the federal and state government from regulating us out of existence and we need to get new people to keep aviculture going. Special interest groups and the government are splintering things. It's hard to pass a big bill to outlaw bird keeping, but

you can regulate animals out of existence with little laws one by one, and pretty soon nothing will be left. For example, if a law is put up for a vote to stop the sale of handfed birds, and you don't care about that issue, you might not take the time to vote against that little restrictive law. All these little restrictive laws will add up and fairly soon, we won't be able to keep birds at all. AFA and aviculturists have to be vigilant, more involved and work together to stop this from happening.

LYRAE: What three things are most important from your perspective, you'd like to share with the readers about aviculture or being an aviculturist?

FRANK JR.: It's important to get the younger generation involved. They need to find someone who has birds, and to learn from him or her. Right now, we have a zoned-out culture. Kids play video games and watch TV inside all day. They don't have much interaction with the outside world and with birds.

2. The general population needs to learn about birds. They are not seeing the truth; they are looking through the glasses of the "do-gooder" and not seeing reality. They are too quick to believe what they hear—birds are very complex. Most people are living removed from the natural world and have lost touch with our roots in the farm life.
3. People need to get some knowledge before getting or breeding birds. People who start with a macaw could be making a mistake, and it might be their last bird. They

should start with a cockatiel, lovebird or a budgie. Get some knowledge before buying a cockatoo or a macaw that can be more demanding.

Conclusion

There are those who are quick criticize anyone successful, and Frank Jr. got some of that over the years, however, he has always been in it for the birds. Time has proven that.

Currently Frank Jr. buys and sells birds at his store in Riverside. He's seen just about everything, and heard it all, too. If you're a breeder, on a slow day he might be cajoled into telling some of his bird stories. He has always dealt fairly with his customers, and he is known for doing the right thing. His store is the only place I know of where you can take your bird in and get the nails and the wings clipped for free.

The prices and variety of bird-related products are the best, but that's not why the customers come back. They come back because of what they learn, the quality of information and the friendliness. There's no pretense on Frank's part, no posturing or showing off. He is the real deal—an aviculturist and a true birdman. He's a "go-to" person if you have a question—and if he doesn't know the answer, he usually knows someone who will. Frank Jr. is an aviculturist I look up to and a person who deserves to be treasured by others for what he brings to the art of keeping birds.



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Cuban Macaw by Wayne E. Smyth

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Revised January 2008

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