



Olde Tymer

Francis Joseph Billie, Jr.,

by Sheldon Dingle, Alhambra, CA

What comes first the egg or the bird? That question has finally been answered—the egg, of course. Or, in the case of Francis Billie, eggs.

It was 61 years ago (1935) that young Billie acquired two Golden Pheasant eggs (for a sum of \$5.00—quite a price in those days) from a Major Smith who had brought several wild caught pairs back from China when his army duty ended. It was eggs from these wild caught birds that wound up in Billie's hands.

Young Billie put the eggs under a neighbor's Banty hen and just one of

them hatched. It turned out to be a beautiful male.

Billie's enthusiasm was aroused. Next, he got a pair of Black Masked Lovebirds. They were followed by some Bantams which he showed at the local fairs and shows.

For several years Billie's Bantams bombed out. No major ribbons or prizes. Then Billie got smart and began taking the names of the breeders whose birds were winners. Later, this charming teenage boy would drop by the winners' farms and buy up a few eggs. Pretty soon Billie's Bantams were taking home the prizes and the former

winners were left scratching their heads—too late.

Eventually, Billie acquired more pheasants including a female Golden for the first male he raised from the egg. After that, Billie raised a fair number of pheasants under his prize-winning Bantams and was able to sell them to Mrs. Cohen at the Florence Avenue Bird Exchange.

From Mrs. Cohen, Billie got his first pair of Lady Gould Finches. It was also at the Florence Ave. Bird Exchange that Billie first met Bernard Roer. Roer bought birds in California and took them back to Phoenix, Arizona.



Photo courtesy of Francis Billie

Three real old time aviculturists go over a few bird books. L to R., Don Tucker, a well known pheasant breeder, the legendary Dr Jean Delacour (in his eighties) and Francis Billie, the recipient of an AFA Gold Avy Award, among his many other honors.

With his Bantams winning prizes and his pheasants making money, Billie acquired pigeons and Zebra Finches—after all, he had an acre lot to fill up.

When he met an old German Canary breeder in nearby San Gabriel, he began breeding Canaries. The Canary cages were home made out of sticks (like matchsticks only longer) and built in a condominium style. The main complex was four breeding cages (attached) with an enclosed porch running across the front of all four cages. Billie kept a female in each cage and had a single male in the porch visiting all the females through the bars. As the females came into breeding condition, Billie would put the male with each female, one at a time, until all four females were bred. The nestling food was made by hand and was a lot of work. Billie raised Canaries for a few years but finally decided that Canaries were just too much work for the price he got.

So, naturally, Billie started raising Budgies. He specialized in the lutinos and albinos and did quite well. So well, in fact, that he went into business with a Mr. Carlyle. Carlyle put up a pet store but didn't have enough money left to buy birds. So Billie supplied the birds for an interest in the pet store. This arrangement lasted a number of years and Billie's collection of birds grew to include a variety of finches, lovebirds, waterfowl and doves.

Once a local preacher offered to trade an Amazon parrot for a pair of Golden Pheasants. Billie gave the parrot to his girl friend, Erma, and Erma discovered the parrot's very profane vocabulary. No wonder the preacher wanted to be rid of the nasty bird.

Not long after this, Billie married his girl friend and they've been husband and wife for 51 years at this writing.

Over the years Francis and Erma Billie have kept and tried to raise over 500 species of birds, having great success with most of them.

The list of birds is obviously much too long to include here but a short list includes the following: **Pheasants**—about 30 species **Partridge**—four species. **Quail**—six species. **Tinamou**—two species. **Doves**—35 species. **Waterfowl**—25 or more species, all

acquired from old timer Billy Parsons.

Softbills—many species including toucans, mynahs, quetzals, starlings, honeycreepers, jays, hummingbirds, tanagers, and many others.

Psittacines—10-15 species of lorries (some gotten from George West, father of renowned aviculturist Dave West), Amazons, all the available Australian parrots, six species of cockatoos, macaws, numerous African parrots, king parrots, kakarikis and others.

Other birds—flamingos (one of which lived 35 years), ibis, trumpeters, guans, curassows and more.

During this time, Billie and a partner named Jimmy Dick got involved in importing birds. Dick set up a trapping and feeding operation in Bangkok with a trapper named Popi. Remember that in those days there were no restrictions on importing wildlife.

Billie also gained many friends in aviculture including Dr. Jean Delacour (who used to visit the Billie home often), Dave West, Bernard Roer, Dr. McLeahy, Frank Miser, Bill Scheffler,

both Rudkins, Mickey Ollson, Jim Hawley, Paul Schneider and many others some of whom are still among us—if just barely.

Francis Billie has always been very active in bird clubs and associations. For more years than anyone can remember, he was the vice president of the Avicultural Society of America, then president; vice president of the California Game Breeder's Association, then president; vice president of the American Federation of Game Bird Breeders and a certified judge for that organization in which capacity he traveled all over the country judging various shows and has served as the Head Judge.

Billie was an active supporter of the AFA from the very beginning and has received three different Silver Avy Awards for outstanding performance in aviculture. He has numerous first breeding awards. He also has letters of commendation from the L.A. County Museum, the L.A. County Fair, the Laboratory of Ornithology at Cornell,

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There is a lot of aviculture in this photo. From L. to R. Mickey Ollson (look at those rosy pink cheeks with out the beard), Francis Billie looking as dapper as always, George Allen II of the American Game Bird Breeders Federation, and Frank Todd (probably while he was curator of birds at the Los Angeles Zoo). It is impossible to really know how much these men have contributed to American aviculture.



Erma Billie relaxing at home with one of her buddies. Erma has been caring for birds since she met Francis about 45 years ago.



Francis Billie is crawling with birds. That's the way he likes it.

Photo by John Krell

the L.A. Zoo and others testifying to how helpful he has been regarding birds. The American Game Bird Breeders' Cooperative Federation has given Billie numerous awards, declared him a Master Breeder and inducted him into their Avicultural Hall of Fame.

Francis Billie has also contributed to the avicultural literature by writing many articles over the years (many of them published in the *Watchbird*) and he is currently working on a book that highlights his avicultural experiences of over 60 years. He wrote on birds as diverse as pheasants, waterfowl and parrots.

All things considered, Francis Billie is the epitome of the avicultural Old Tymer. He continues to contribute to aviculture and is a virtual gold mine of information for the less experienced next generation of aviculturists.

Our sincere thanks to Francis and Erma Billie who as a team have made an indelible mark on American aviculture.



The Palawan Peacock Pheasant is a shy bird and hard to find in the wild. Billie raised lots of them in a cardboard box heated by light bulbs.



Francis Billie is one of the best gamebird judges in the United States and has judged all over the country. His knowledge comes not only from study, but from hands-on experience raising pheasants such as this beautiful Temminck's Tragopan.



The Australian Plumed Dove is one of Francis Billie's favorite birds. He often took a pet Plumed Dove to meetings to entertain folks. If I remember correctly, Billie carried the dove in a coat pocket.



The Luzon Bleeding Heart Dove is just one of many doves and pigeons Billie kept at "Francis Billie's Tropical Jungle."



Photo by Frank Todd

Francis Billie displayed waterfowl in ponds at shows and fairs. He is famous for dragging ordinary electric light cords into ponds and shorting out whole city blocks. He had a flamingo display that snapped and crackled with 120 volt sparks. The fire department shut down the whole fair but the flamingos were not fazed. Neither was Billie.