

AFA Convention 2010

Keynote Address

Origins and History of the American Federation of Aviculture—A Magical Organization?

By Dr. Benny J. Gallaway

The 36th Annual Convention “The Magic of Birds” in St. Petersburg, Florida was held in August. The tall wizard’s hat and flowing majestic robes of the speaker, Dr. Benny Gallaway, appeared center stage delivering a memorable keynote address asking the question: Is the American Federation of Aviculture Inc. a magical organization?

The AFA was founded in 1974 as a 501(c)3 educational organization. The mission statement: “To provide the advancement of aviculture through educational programs that support improved husbandry practices, conservation, research and legislative awareness” has provided a benchmark for important events and people who have shaped the organization. AFA has been recognized since the mid-1980s as the grass roots organization of American Aviculture.

Today, the AFA offers avicultural educational programs online where continuing education credits are awarded for these programs, as well as for the conventions. Additional educational efforts include publishing the premier avicultural magazine or journal, the *Watchbird*. AFA supports a diversity of research and conservation studies, and



Dr. Benny J. Gallaway delivers the keynote address at the 2010 AFA Convention in St. Petersburg, Fla.

has an ongoing effort to keep its members aware of potential adverse legislation. Further, AFA reaches out in times of crises (e.g., hurricanes and wildfires) to assist bird owners in reclaiming their lives. While many know what AFA does and its importance, relatively few know how the organization became what it is today and the people who shaped its history.

Origins—The Early 1970s

In 1973, the California state legislature drafted a bill to ban the keeping of all wild animals in captivity, including virtually all of the bird species

kept in aviculture. The Orange County Bird Breeders asked one of its members, Jerry Jennings, to testify against that bill in Sacramento, the California state capital. The bill was killed but was revived in 1974, at about the same time the U.S. Department of Interior’s Injurious Wildlife Proposal surfaced. In this proposal, all exotic birds were characterized as posing a significant threat to agriculture, horticulture, forestry, and domestic wildlife. Given these threats, five of the most active clubs got together and by the end of March 1974 had an umbrella organization, a federation of

clubs which would serve to educate and inform the member bird clubs on everything avicultural from how to breed Budgies to what was going on at the local and federal levels that would affect aviculture. This 501(c)3 organization, The American Federation of Aviculture, was designed to, among other things, represent all five clubs when necessary, thus eliminating the need and expense for each club to send its own people to the state capital, Washington, D.C., or wherever. The newly formed organization elected Jerry Jennings as the inaugural President (Aug. 2, 1974–Aug. 21,

1976) and was instrumental in educating legislators to the extent that the threatening legislation was either killed or withdrawn. The small group decided they needed to expand outside the state of California and did so by joining every bird club they could find that issued a roster of members. The group combed through 10 years of issues of the *American Cage Bird Magazine* selecting names to hand-address a nationwide mailing expanding the horizons of the fledgling organization. Nevertheless, the new organization was not widely embraced as a necessary entity and grew slowly.

In 1974, the organization consisted of about 50 individual members who had contributed ten dollars each. They established a biweekly

newsletter that was just one page printed on both sides containing bad news about proposed legislation. The group decided to use its meager assets to print articles of a wider range. Jean Hessler and Sheldon Dingle created the *Watchbird* in her studio on a drawing board. The first issue of *Watchbird* was published August of 1974 and included eight pages in black and white with a few small pictures. Shortly thereafter they took a big step forward by printing the cover of the February/March 1976 issue in color. These individuals began as volunteers, and produced the *Watchbird* over a thirty year period. They were seldom, if ever, truly compensated for their efforts. The *Watchbird* became the face of AFA thanks largely to the

hard work and efforts of Jean Hessler and Sheldon Dingle.

In 1975, a major breakthrough occurred when the prestigious Avicultural Society of America (founded in 1927) affiliated with AFA. Real growth ensued when other clubs followed the lead of Avicultural Society of America. The first convention was held in San Diego, Calif., in August 1975 and was a rousing success. The organization was on its way.

In 1976, Lee Horton was elected president, and the second annual convention was held on the *Queen Mary* at Long Beach Harbor. The AFA expanded its educational efforts, producing its first special publication, *A Teaching Guide for Birds in the Classroom* by Roger Tally.

Aviculture and aviculturists were flourishing.

The Crisis of the Late 1970s

In 1977, an outbreak of Exotic Newcastle Disease occurred in California and Virginia. The disease was first found in parrotlets in Virginia. By the time of the outbreak, the Virginia dealer had sold birds to some 40 to 50 pet shops and/or bird breeders in 14 states. In California, the disease was found in pheasants and the dealer had sold birds to about 25 pet shops and bird breeders in six states. The birds purchased from the infected dealers were located and destroyed, and tissue samples were taken for testing. With one exception, none of the purchased birds showed any evidence of

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infection. Nevertheless, the Federal Agents began the arbitrary extermination of all the healthy birds in the collections of everyone who had made purchases from the infected dealers after the established date of the outbreak. Thousands of exotic birds, including endangered species, were depopulated. Some of these collections had taken years to assemble and/or represented years of selective breeding.

AFA and its members sought an alternative to the unreasonable destruction of exotic birds without any proof of infection. The request to have their birds placed under federal quarantine and tested to prove that they were or were not infected, which was the same procedure approved for imported birds, was refused and the slaughter

continued. The AFA sought an injunction against the Federal Government's depopulation program. After overcoming some tricky legal maneuvers by the opposition, they entered the Federal Courthouse in Los Angeles on May 2, 1977, to present their case. The United States government and the State of California made a joint announcement that the VVND Task Force had been disbanded on April 30, 1977. The judge ruled that because the task force had been abandoned, the AFA motion for injunction was no longer appropriate. However, he further ruled that before the task force could be reactivated, AFA had to be contacted so they could re-file for an injunction if appropriate.

The series of tragic events and the ultimate victory resulted in

a passionate allegiance to AFA from the early membership. AFA had taken on the federal government and won, saving additional thousands of exotic birds from slaughter. Words alone could never convey the horror of that part of the AFA history. The Newcastle Supplements to the *Watchbird*, dated March 31 and June 6, 1977, reflect the accounts of this period of history.

In 1978, Lee Horton's tenure ended in praise and glory mainly due to the END event. Dr. Richard Baer succeeded Lee Horton as AFA President. Dr. Baer had been a major force in AFA's battle against END.

The Golden Era of the 1980s and 1990s

During the 1981-1989 period, AFA solidified its

credibility and standing in both aviculture and scientific circles. In these years, AFA was led by Tom Ireland, Lee Phillips, Jerry Jennings and Tom Marshall. Tom Marshall was an excellent fund raiser. For example, he raised \$43,000 from three individual letters. His most successful letter, the "CITES Letter" raised \$19,000 and this extra revenue allowed the *Watchbird* staff to publish a special issue specifically for the first CITES meeting to be held in Switzerland.

By 1985, AFA was recognized by the U.S. Department of Agriculture as the leading organization of bird breeders and listed by the Technical Assistance Office of the U.S. Government as the grass roots organization for the saving of endangered species by captive

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breeding. AFA was awarded non-government observer status to the Convention in International Trade in Endangered Species. The NGOs to CITES are allowed to participate on committees with the government parties where they can provide information, opinions, and position statements. At the main sessions, the Conference of the Parties, where all voting takes place, NOGs are allowed to present information and opinions but cannot vote.

Many within the AFA have contributed to the CITES legacy enjoyed by AFA, including, but not restricted to, the designated committee representatives over the years, especially Al McNabney and Rick Jordan. The CITES Committee under the leadership of Chair Rick Jordan has generated much of its own funding through the sale of pins, keyfobs, and artwork. The importance of AFA's role in CITES to aviculture must not be overlooked. Legislation emanating at this international level has become the model for national policies. AFA must be involved and vigilant as the policies unfold.

From 1989–1990, Phyllis Martin was president. AFA's first CITES special publication was finalized during her tenure. She was succeeded by Jack C. Eitnair, and then Laurella Desborough. The period between 1980s and the mid-1990s were characterized by a number of challenges that were countered with effective educational and research programs sponsored by the AFA. The *Watchbird* evolved into

one of the finest avicultural educational publications in the world, featuring articles on the husbandry of a broad array of exotic birds, conservation, and legislative awareness. Conventions were gala affairs, highlighted by the availability of a wealth of new information as avian research poured in from the Association of Avian Veterinarians (an offshoot of the AFA Veterinary Seminars held at early conventions), the conservation community, and aviculturists world-wide. New information came from AFA-sponsored research. Under the leadership of AFA's third President, Dr. Richard Baer, AFA produced an Endangered Species Portfolio (authored by Frank Todd and Jean Delacour) highlighting the species in American aviculture and the role of aviculture in their conservation. President Tom Ireland instituted an AFA research program under the initial direction of Dr. Susan Clubb. Between 1982 and 1988, 28 proposals were funded for a total of more than \$75,000. An additional 14 projects were funded between 1989 and 1993, raising the funding level to more than \$100,000. The results of these research programs were published in *Watchbird* and also in scientific journals.

In 1987, a research program was initiated by AFA, under the auspices of the Conservation Committee. During the period 1987 to 1994, 26 conservation research projects were funded by the AFA, ranging from field studies in countries of origin to breeding biology to behavior with

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the results published in AFA *Watchbird* as well as in scientific journals. Under Laurella Deborough's leadership, AFA continued to be a force in CITES, publishing two more CITES supplements. AFA was making a real and tangible contribution to the husbandry of exotic birds in captivity and their conservation in the wild. By the end of President Desborough's third term, in 1997 AFA's income and membership, although at all time highs, was not keeping pace with expenses.

New President Gary Clifton brought a different focus to the table, emphasizing the business aspects of the AFA as much as the avicultural issues. The results were a significant economic turnaround, and a maturing of the organization. President

Clifton finalized the AFA Endowment Fund. Another legacy of his administration was the publication of the first book with the AFA logo on its cover, *African Parrots*, by Jordan and Patterson. AFA was poised for the turn of the century!

The Early 21st Century

In the 21st Century, Robert (Bob) J. Berry became the 11th individual to serve as president of AFA. Mr. Berry was also the founding chairman of the Conservation Committee, Specialty Editor for the *Watchbird*, and executive director. Under his presidency he helped to bring professional direction and renewed vision to the organization. Bob focused his energies on restructuring, reorganization and revitalization of the AFA with a major focus on

the education leg. He initiated the development of an avicultural curriculum under AFA and encouraged and developed support of fine art within the organization. In 1998, Mr. Berry was awarded Honorary Life Membership by the AFA Board of Directors, one of only five people ever to receive this honor. Mr. Berry retired from the presidency in 2000. What AFA is today is largely due to his vision.

In 2000, as first vice president, Dr. Benny Gallaway succeeded Mr. Berry as president serving seven years. During his tenure Dr. Gallaway continued initiatives started by Mr. Berry. The AFA store and website were created. Other activities included dealing with the retirement of Sheldon Dingle, and Jean Hessler and

restructuring the *Watchbird*, dealing with new END outbreaks, finalizing the Fundamentals of Aviculture Level I, contracting professional Office Management Services, dealing with the Animal Welfare Act, creating NAWA, creating and implementing Disaster Relief Services, and resuming AFA-sponsored conservation grants. Perhaps the most significant accomplishment during this period was the negotiation of a pet and exotic bird policy that saved many birds from eradication during the END outbreaks. Basically, exemptions were obtained for pet and exotic birds until testing was conducted. Exempted birds had to be held in biosecure facilities at the owner's expense, but there were no large-scale eradications of exotic birds like happened in

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the 1970s. Many, many people with AFA helped obtain this exemption. Many, many birds were saved.

Jim Hawley Jr., succeeded Dr. Gallaway, and is the current president of AFA. To date, Mr. Hawley has focused on digitizing all issues of *Watchbird*, and obtaining approval for Continuing Education Units for Fundamentals of Aviculture Level I. Furthering Fundamentals of Aviculture Level II has been funded with grants and is near completion. President Hawley has also continued AFA's conservation and research legacy with two studies proposed for 2009: Red-fronted Macaw Project and Indonesian Parrot Project. He is also continuing to deal with legislative issues, developing an AFA Facebook account and

updating the website.

What is next for AFA? More and more of our early founders are retiring, and a new generation is emerging, many of whom are unfamiliar with the essential importance of AFA. AFA should not lose sight of its history and should remember that the rich legacy was provided by the hard work and sacrifice of our past leaders. AFA must maintain its focus on basic goals and, at the same time, continue to adapt and meet the challenges of the future and the changing demographics of the membership. Such major challenges include: To establish long-term, self-sustaining, genetically stable, captive populations of selected avian species, to continue to establish the credibility and credentials of the avicultural

community, and to use the existing legacy to support and sustain a strong central organization that provides leadership, cohesion, direction and representation for the avicultural community.

In addition, remember that AFA is not a lobbying organization; AFA is not a specialty organization or bird club; AFA promotes the aviculture of all avian species (parrots, pheasants, water fowl, pigeons and doves, finches, softbills, etc.), AFA is not a local or regional organization, AFA is a national federation of individuals and affiliated organizations working together.

Finally, to answer the initial question—is AFA a magical organization? “No, it wasn't magic.” AFA has become what it is through the hard work and

dedication of many, many people, from breeders to pet owners, from Ph.D.'s to those with little or no education. Above all, as many old timers will tell you—it's about the birds!

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