

# The Parrot of Gold

## The story of a Golden Conure

By Sue Ferrara, PhD.

*The Parrot of Gold*—that was the title of an article written by AFA president Nancy Speed, and published in the Winter 2002 edition of the *Companion Parrot Quarterly*. While a casual reader would correctly conclude the article was about a golden-colored parrot—a Golden Conure—tracking the history of the bird, also known as the Queen of Bavaria, leads one to conclude that like gold, this parrot is a rare beauty on many levels.

The Golden Conure, wrote Speed, “is native to a very small area in Brazil. Its range extends to the bank of the Madeira Rio, and is as far east as the Gurupi.” The bird was reportedly named Queen of Bavaria in 1788 by Johann Friedrich Gmelin, MD, a naturalist and physician who also published Linnaeus’ *Systema Naturae* between 1788 and 1793.

Blogger Karen McGovern of Parrotphenalia wrote in 2006 that the Golden Conure was given this name because it was a gift for the Queen of Bavaria. That queen was Marie Wilhelmine August of Hessen Darmstadt who was married to Maximilian I, who became king in 1785.

Who presented the conure to Marie Wilhelmine August, and when, has either been lost to history, or is buried in a Portuguese language reference. Brazil became a Portuguese colony in the 1530s, with independence being granted in 1822. W. T. Greene, author of *Parrots in Captivity* (written between 1884-1887), noted that a Golden Conure had “survived since 1871 in the Parrot House of the Zoological Gardens in Regent’s Park” in London.

Greene added, “The Golden Parrot is not of very common occurrence in its native country.” However, Greene cited two other zoos at the time, those at Berlin and Antwerp, as housing Golden Conures. And Greene wrote that Prince Ferdinand of Saxe Coburg Gotha also owned one of these unusual birds.

The Golden Conure, like other parrots discovered in the New World, was captured and brought to other places. Greene noted: “Considering the scarcity of these birds in their native country, the infrequency of their importation into Europe, and their consequent high price, it is not surprising that no attempt at breeding them has been made, much less that no successful rearing of a brood of Gold Parrots has been recorded ... “Green mused that encouraging such a “hardy and docile” parrot to reproduce shouldn’t be difficult.

But apparently breeding Queen of Bavaria conures, while potentially lucrative, was not that easy, judging by a 1954 story which ran in the *New York Times*.

Margarine and Oleo were two Golden Conures once owned by the 30th Governor of Pennsylvania, George Howard Earle III.

Earle served as governor from 1935 to 1937 and then took positions in the Franklin Roosevelt Administration. How and where he acquired the conures is another story lost to history. Earle’s son, Ambassador Ralph Earle II, serves as the Deputy Director for the US Arms Control and Disarmament Agency. An email was sent to Ambassador Earle through the State Department Press Office asking if he remembered anything about his father’s conures. So far, no response.

Governor Earle eventually sold Margarine and Oleo to Mr. and Mrs. Harry Zelenko of 450 East Sixty-third Street in NYC. By August of 1954, Margarine and Oleo were reportedly living happily together in a “nail barrel” in the Zelenko apartment, along with other “rare birds and monkeys.” The Zelenkos “insisted that Oleo and Margarine were [sic] the only compatible pair of conures in captivity. Plans were therefore afoot to mate them next spring in what would have been the first known instance of conures breeding in captivity.”

So one might ask, if a couple owned such a rare pair of conures, why would they house them in a nail barrel, leave them alone for a weekend with the rest of the menagerie, and with an



Antique Nail Barrel

apartment window cracked open? Margarine, also called Margie, clearly saw that opening as an opportunity to explore NYC and out the window she apparently escaped.

“Margie disappeared at 7 A.M. Sunday while her husband, Oleo, either was asleep or too drowsy to raise a ruckus. As far as it can be determined, Margie squeezed out through the slightly open living-room window of the apartment of her owners ...”

The Zelenkos started searching for Margie on Sunday night after returning from their weekend away. Margie apparently “fluttered down from the seventh-floor apartment” and “was last seen parading up and down the sidewalk in front of the building. Then she vanished.”

Margie was clipped, Mr. Zelenko told the reporter; therefore, he also concluded Margie must have been stolen. Zelenko was a commercial artist and immediately generated “handbills describing Margie and offering a substantial award.” Mr. Zelenko first estimated the value of Margie at \$500 (about \$4,200 in 2013 dollars) and then \$600 (a little over \$5,100 in 2013).

That initial New York Times story also carried a “final word of advice” for those who might go looking for the missing parrot/parakeet. “Do not speak to her in English. She knows only Portuguese, except for a rather objectionable Anglo-Saxon expression.”

The day after the first story of Margie’s escape appeared in the newspaper, someone reported seeing Margie “taking the air on Sixty-third Street and walking toward the Children’s Garden on York Avenue.” The Zelenkos immediately took Oleo to the area in order to pass out handbills and to see if Oleo “sang his scratchy love song” Margie would appear. No such luck. Oleo went back to the “lonely nail keg.”

Readers, trying to assist in finding Margie, actually made the search more difficult due to inaccurate sightings and a misunderstanding of terms.

“Calling a parrot a parakeet in news stories and advertisements about the missing bird has caused a great deal of confusion in the minds of people who have been trying to help... While the bird is technically a parakeet because of its long, slender tail, it is larger than the type of parakeet generally seen around here and is more readily identified by the broader term of parrot, Mrs. Zelenko explained... the Zelenkos have received hundreds of calls from people who have spotted parakeets of the smaller variety.”

The story of Margarine and Oleo has a happy ending. On August 9, 1954 the headline read: *Errant Parakeet Is Brought Home To Her Mate, and All Is Forgiven*. Margie, however, did not return home before a two state search! Mr. Zelenko “hired a detective and they went to Danbury, Conn., on what they considered a reliable tip that a man had been seen taking the bird there by train. The trail ended in Danbury.”

The news stories never indicated if Margie was ever really on a train to Connecticut. Actually, the story might lead readers to believe she never wandered far from the building housing the nail keg in the 7th floor apartment.

“Mr. Zelenko said that a neighbor, Victor Moruzzi, 41-year old machine wood carver of 409 East Sixty-third Street, arrived



**Path of Margie, the missing Golden Conure, in August of 1954, beginning on E. 63rd St. and ending up on E. 86th St.**

in the apartment with Margie, explaining that he had found her in a cage with other birds in Children’s Garden on York Avenue.

Mr. Moruzzi’s apartment was just doors away from the Zelenko’s home. The Children’s Garden near York Avenue was nearly a mile and a half away from East 63rd Street.

“A grateful Mr. Zelenko said he gave Mr. Moruzzi a check for \$100 (about \$850), the promised reward.”

Due to the news coverage, Mr. and Mrs. Zelenko received “200 telephone calls... from sympathetic New Yorkers.” Mr. Zelenko, when asked to describe Margie’s return, said Margie was “dirty, hungry and thirsty.” Oleo, being the good mate, “nudged her into the nail barrel to sleep.”

And what did Margie have to say for herself

“All Margie said was ‘Good girl,’ words she had heard the Zelenkos use to praise her. Apparently, her conscience was clear.”

But the story of Margarine and Oleo doesn’t end here.

In fact, Harry Zelenko, now 85-years old, is writing about and growing orchids in Ecuador. Mr. Zelenko was found through his daughter Linda’s 1991 wedding announcement which ran in the New York Times. Ms. Zelenko kindly forwarded questions to her father about the 1954 incident.

The first response from Mr. Zelenko read:

*Dear Dr. Ferrara...*

*I’m still alive. If you will be patient, I will write about the Queen of Bavaria conures. If you have any articles from the New York Times, please forward them to me... I don’t have anything but a few recollections about the “birdnapping.”*

*I do know where the birds came from originally and from whom George Earl got them . . I had eleven of the species at one time or another, including a vicious one from Henry Bradley Martin that went to Trefflich when it bit my daughter Lori.*

## HARRY ZELENKO

Henry Bradley Martin was a New York City antique book collector. According to his obituary, he owned a copy of George Washington's Federalist papers. Trefflich, was Henry Trefflich, a renowned animal importer and dealer who died in 1978.

In a second email, Mr. Zelenko acknowledged receiving the New York Times articles and wrote

*I'm working on a large book on a group of orchids . . . I will write an article in the coming weeks . . . or months . . . not to worry.*

Three days later, on February 8th, Mr. Zelenko sent an email about Margarine and Oleo based on the stories from the *New York Times* which jogged his memories.

And here is Harry's story:

*Hello Again...*

*Here's a draft of an article which outlines what I remember. It also is condensed from the articles in the New York Times. You can see pictures of the species in Google.*

ALBEST, HARRY ZELENKO [sic]

*The Queen of Bavaria saga began in 1954. We had kept a*

*few parrots and parakeets in our apartment and had begun to appreciate them for their intelligence and beauty. My wife and I had taken a short vacation to an island in the Caribbean and returned to Miami on the way home to New York City. Driving south from Miami, we happened upon the Miami Rare Bird Farm which was owned by Alton Freeman. We went in to visit and while there, saw two beautiful parrots that fascinated us. Instead of the usual overall green, these birds were a rich golden yellow with deep green wings and pinkish beaks and feet. The species is Brazilian in origin, found only on Marajo Island, a very large island in the mouth of the Amazon across from Belem. They were considered a rare species in 1954 and are even rarer today, now listed as an endangered species. They measure about 14 inches in length and have very loud voices.*

*Alton Freeman told us they were on consignment from a private owner whom he would arrange for us to meet. Later that day, we sat with a gentleman: middle aged, slightly portly, quite erudite and most interesting. His name was George H. Earle. He had been a Lieutenant Commander in the Navy during World War I. In 1933, he became Minister to Austria. He was elected governor of Pennsylvania in 1935. It was his recommendation to President Roosevelt to begin laying a network of new roads throughout the United States. The project put many unemployed men to work as the depression wore on. Following his term as governor, a problem in his relationship with Roosevelt arose and he was assigned (banished) in 1943 to become assistant governor of Samoa and the Moluccan Islands; and after returning to the States he served*

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**Henry Zelenko, previous owner of Margarine and Oleo, two Golden Conures**

as the Minister to Bulgaria during part of World War II.

While in the Moluccans, he became interested in the local birds, and he brought back a Moluccan cockatoo, a large psitticine bird with an erectile crest and soft off-white tannish color, when he returned to the States. His interest in parrots continued, and in the 1950's he acquired the pair of Golden conures, often called the Queen of Bavaria Conure, the only species in the genus (*Guaruba guarouba*). He wished to part with them and we bought them on the spot. The birds were expensive but we wrote a check for the asking price and brought the pair of parrots home to New York. George Earle was to become a friend over the years, and we met with him on and off for years when he came to New York.

The birds were ensconced in our apartment. Since they were tame they spent a good part of the day on our shoulders when we were at home or in a tree made of driftwood. We named the male Oleo and the female Margie (short for Margarine). We hoped to breed them.

Margie vanished early on a Sunday morning. Although her wings were clipped, she was able to fly short distances. She escaped through a window that was open about five inches and fluttered seven stories down, landing across the street from our apartment building. We printed small posters which read, "Bright Yellow Parrot Missing. Mate Moping.

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Many people called us having seen a parakeet in the park or roaming the city, but a woman, who was coincidentally from the neighborhood, told us she had seen a yellow bird on a train that morning when she was on her way to Danbury, Connecticut. A man was carrying the bird in a small canvas bag and when the bird made a loud noise, he opened the bag.

To us, the situation looked hopeless. Because the bird was so rare and so valuable, we contacted the local police and they took on the search, calling it a "bird-napping." Following the only lead, one of the detectives went to Danbury, Connecticut and checked out the stores that sold bird seed.

The word was out in Danbury and somehow, word got to Victor Moruzzi, the man with Margie, and he ended the two state search the following Sunday night around eleven-thirty. He brought Margie home and I gave him the posted reward, for he could not have known where the bird had come from. Apparently, he had relatives in Danbury that he visited on Sundays and he left the bird with them during the week, returning with the bird the following Sunday.

We were grateful but Oleo was silent.

Did Margarine and Oleo ever mate? What ultimately happened to the conures?

"No. They did not breed," wrote Mr. Zelenko. "We gave them to a zoo."

Which zoo?

"It was 60 years ago ... it might have been to the Philadelphia zoo but I am not sure ... it was a long time ago. It could have been to Dave West, a breeder. I do remember giving the zoo a pair of eclectus."

Then the email correspondence ended. Harry Zelenko returned to his work with orchids.

Now the only possible way to track Margarine and Oleo could be through the Golden Conure studbook; or possibly records kept by zoos.

Fortunately for the species, there are people like Nancy Speed who work to maintain the existence of the Queen of Gold.



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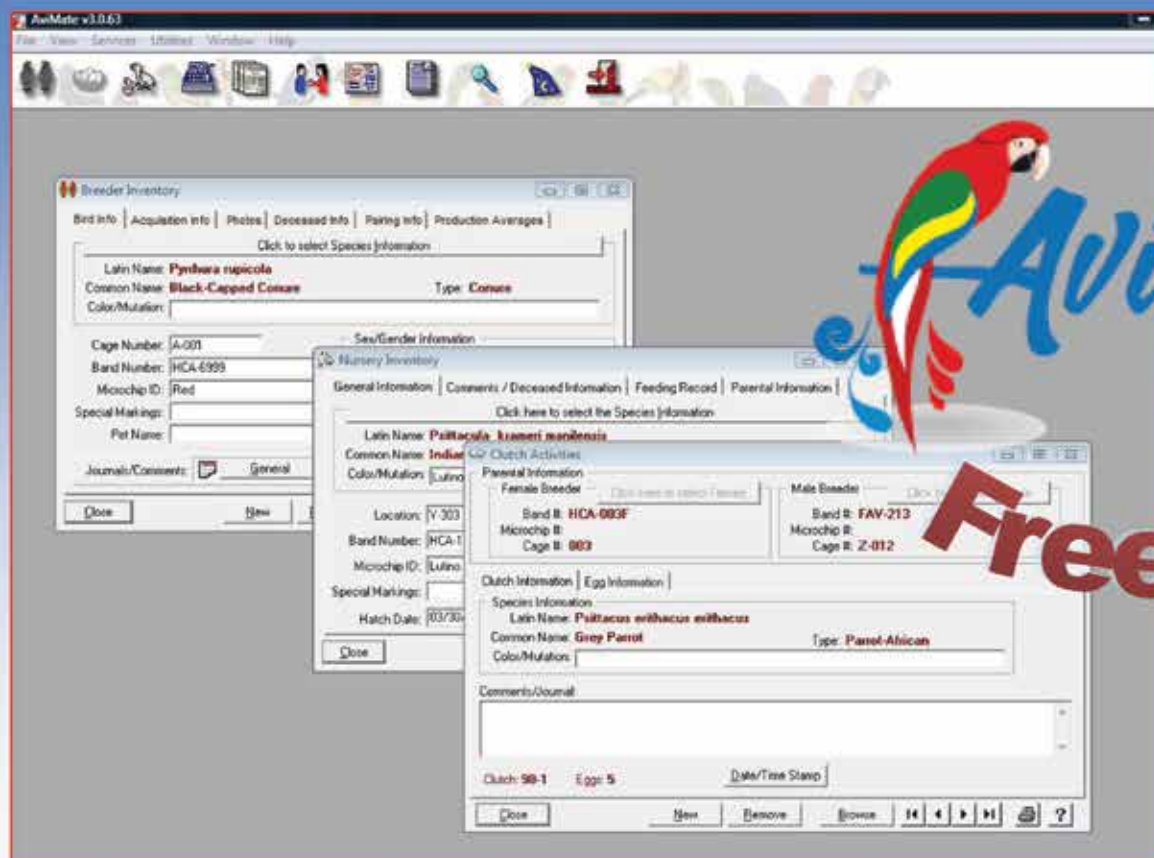
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### By Rick Jordan

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