

# George Alfred Smith, BVet Med, MRCVS.

## 1931-2006

By Josef Lindholm III, Senior Aviculturist, The Dallas World Aquarium

"You know, we did it all wrong" observed Dr. Smith as he contemplated San Francisco traffic out the window of a #38 (Geary) bus. "We should have fought your Revolutionary War to its conclusion, hanged George Washington as a traitor, and held onto to the Colonies... until you leaned to drive on THE LEFT SIDE OF THE ROAD!"

We were on our way to Golden Gate Park, to the California Academy of Sciences, whose Curator and Chair of Ornithology and Mammalogy, Luis Baptista, had urged me to kidnap Dr. Smith from the 1985 AFA National Convention and bring him to see him. I had not met Dr. Smith before, so was somewhat cautious as I introduced myself after his fascinating presentation on Asian Parakeets, and suggested playing hooky to the museum. He stared at my name badge and asked "You're not American, are you, Josef? You pronounce all your consonants. Most American say 'Fordy' and you would say 'Forty'. That's why I asked."

I (born and raised in Berkeley, California) was used to people saying I talked funny. Occasionally some one might compliment my "interesting accent". But until then, no one had ever said why. Analytical thinking and a complete lack of hesitation in asking penetrating questions were typical of George Smith. So were a sardonic wit and a truly encyclopedic erudition that extended far beyond aviculture and ornithology. While lecturing on his beloved Caiques, George made reference to the 17<sup>th</sup> Century diarist John Evelyn, "who we think evil, because he broke his dog's leg", it being his opinion that clipping the wings of pet parrots was scarcely worse. He mailed me Thomas Huxley's response to a letter of sympathy from Charles Kingsley, after the death of Huxley's son. He was always ready to quote Alfred, Lord Tennyson's *In Memoriam*, or perform an exuberant rendition of Lewis Carroll's *Jaberwocky*, compete with stabbing gestures ("One Two! One Two! And through and through!") in a crowd while waiting to get into the AFA banquet hall, no less!). Through a good portion of a visit to the San Antonio Zoo, he whistled the "Taken from a county jail" refrain from *The Mikado*.

And he was a consummate story teller – One reason he was in demand as an AFA speaker, appearing

at nationals at least five times over a nineteen year span, to my knowledge. George produced a very convincing creaking noise as he described opening a box, with rusty hinges, in a small English country church. This contained generations of baptismal records for a parish whose members probably never traveled more than fifteen miles from where they were born. That particular investigation stemmed from his fascination with inbred populations and the resulting expression of mutations, as recessive genes came together in far greater frequencies than otherwise. "But that's how you get your mutations!" he would exclaim, when aviculturists expressed a horror of inbreeding. His vast knowledge of mutations was another reason he was popular at conventions. Some of his American visits were sponsored by organizations of mutation Ring-neck breeders, and he was close friends with such well-known *Psittacula* mutation specialists as Rick Jordan, Roger Bringas, and Babu Chauhan. His book *Lovebirds and Related Parrots* (Smith, 1979) is an exhaustive catalogue of the mutations recorded for *Psittacula* and *Agapornis* through the 1970's. It is also replete with avicultural history, another of his great interests.

George's study of mutations was motivated by far more than avicultural interest, being but one manifestation of his profound interest in evolutionary biology. His exploration of psittacine taxonomy (Smith, 1975) established him as an ornithologist, though his academic credentials were as a veterinarian. His paper, laying out his revision of parrot systematics, runs fifty pages in the *Ibis*, the august publication of the British Ornithologist's Union, and continues to be cited by such luminaries as Joseph Forshaw and Nigel Collar. George published a four page summary in the first chapter of his *Lovebirds and Related Parrots* (Smith, 1979). Some of his more startling proposals, such as segregating the New World parrots in their own family (Aridae), or placing Rosellas, Kakarikis, Budgies, *Neophemas*, and other Grass Parakeets together with Cockatoos, Keas, and Kakapos, in a family separate from other parrots (Platyercidae), have not become widely accepted. Other conclusions, however, are not questioned today. It is widely recognized that the lories do not warrant status as a family (born out, long after the publication of his paper, by the production of hybrids between Swainson's Lorikeets and

King Parrots). The New World Parrots are now recognized as a monophyletic, cohesive group whereas, in times past, it was suggested that the Amazons might be close relatives of the *Poicephalus* of Africa, and the Gray Parrot.

George's research in psittacine systematics was multi-faceted. He performed meticulous dissections on as many genera as he could. He told me one of his long-standing regrets was never obtaining a member of the genus *Psittacella* (the New Guinea Tiger Parrots) to dissect, or being able to examine an intact skeleton. He also availed himself of the great study skin collections of the world's museums. While speaking at the 1991 AFA Convention in Washington DC, he took the opportunity to investigate the possibility of Scarlet Macaw subspecies (Smith, 1991), a controversy not resolved until 1994, when the Northern population was formally described as *Ara macao cyanoptera* (Wiedenfeld, 1994). His conclusions were cited in this description.

At the same time, he compiled a rich file of comparative behavioral observations. Some were conducted in the field. (His friends will remember his frustration at exploring New Guinea with a bunch of "Twitchers". No sooner had he found a flock of Pygmy Parrots he could clearly observe, this herd of fanatic birders were ready to rush off and find another addition to their life lists.) On the other hand, his avicultural observations are unique due to the truly remarkable collection of parrots that inhabited his aviaries at one time or another.

Among them was one of the only two Yellow-eared Parrots (*Ognorhynchus icterotis*) known to have left South America alive (Smith, 1977, Low, 1980, 1984), which George obtained around ten years after it arrived in England in 1965. After publishing his own observations on this now critically endangered bird (Smith, 1977), George loaned it to Rosemary Low, who made further ones, and published what may have been the first photos of a living specimen. After attempting to pair it with a Yellow-collared Macaw, George then donated it to Vogelpark Walsrode along with the last Spix's Macaw in England, which he had obtained around the same time. He only parted with them because he could not locate mates.

He was recognized by the Avicultural Society for

the first breeding in the United Kingdom of the Green-cheeked Conure (Smith, 1979b) and the Red-capped Parrot (*Pionopsitta pileata*) (Smith, 1977b). Among other species in his aviaries about which he wrote in detail were the Dusky *Pionus* (Smith, 1977a), Rueppell's Parrots (Smith, 1977c), Long-tailed Parakeets (Smith, 1979a), and some of the first Salvadori's Fig Parrots in England (Smith, 1977c). One would be mistaken to assume he was a connoisseur of only the rarest species. He found all birds fascinating. His *Encyclopedia of the Cockatiel* (Smith, 1978), remains a valued reference.

Another facet of his research was an authoritative knowledge of ornithological and avicultural literature. He loved books. What I most remember from his 1985 meeting with Luis Baptista was a visit to the Academy's rare book room, where a volume of John Gould's *Birds of Australia* was taken from its shelf, so George could examine the plate depicting "the Fiery Parakeet (*Platycercus ignitus*)", a naturally occurring opaline mutation of the Eastern Rosella, which Gould had discovered in the 1830's.

His own library was vast, housed in a climate-controlled room to protect it from English humidity. He created it not only as a source of pleasure, but as a practical resource. George hated anecdotal stories, which would be repeated by one "authority" after another, eventually becoming hard-to-kill avicultural myths. (Dubious tales of hybridization were a particular bane (Smith, 1979d)). He insisted on well documented references. "You're only

as good as your sources", he solemnly instructed me. Editors of this and other publications, who may have been dismayed by the length of some of my bibliographies, can blame George Smith.

All of this research and publication was conducted at the same time he maintained his practice as a full time Veterinarian, having received his qualifications in 1959, following a stint in the RAF. At his Broadway Veterinary Clinic, at Peterborough (eighty miles north of London), he saw all manner of pets. His renown as a bird vet did not prevent him from looking after dogs and cats. Of course he published on avian diseases, and conducted lengthy investigations of French Molt, among other things. And, since 1976, he was a husband and doting father, as well.



George Alfred Smith, BVet Med, MRCS.  
1931-2006

His kind encouragement and advice will be long remembered by many, and missed. But his books and numerous articles in the *Avicultural Magazine* and *The Magazine of the Parrot Society*, as well as a few in *AFA Watchbird* will long be valued for their erudition, and enjoyed of their wit style, and an obvious joy in their subject.

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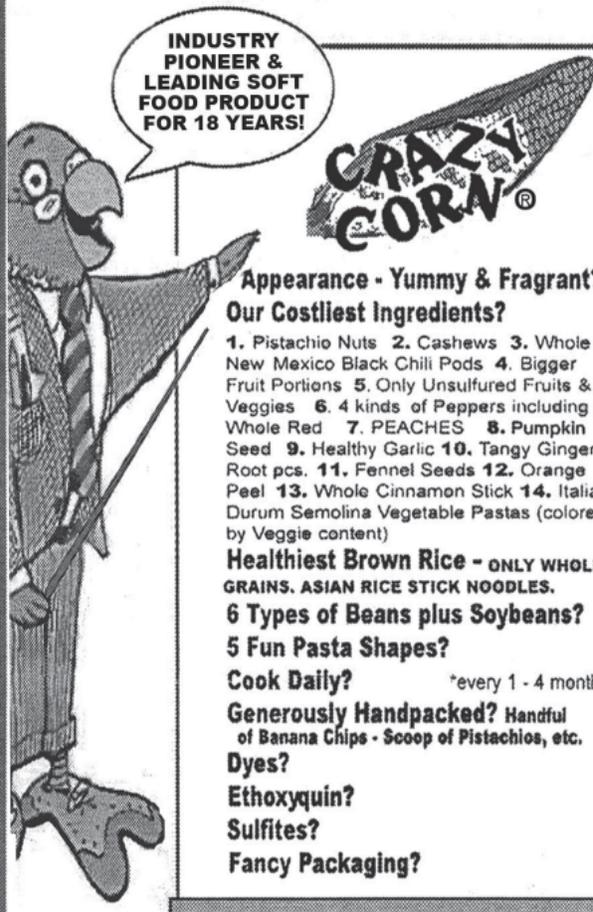
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