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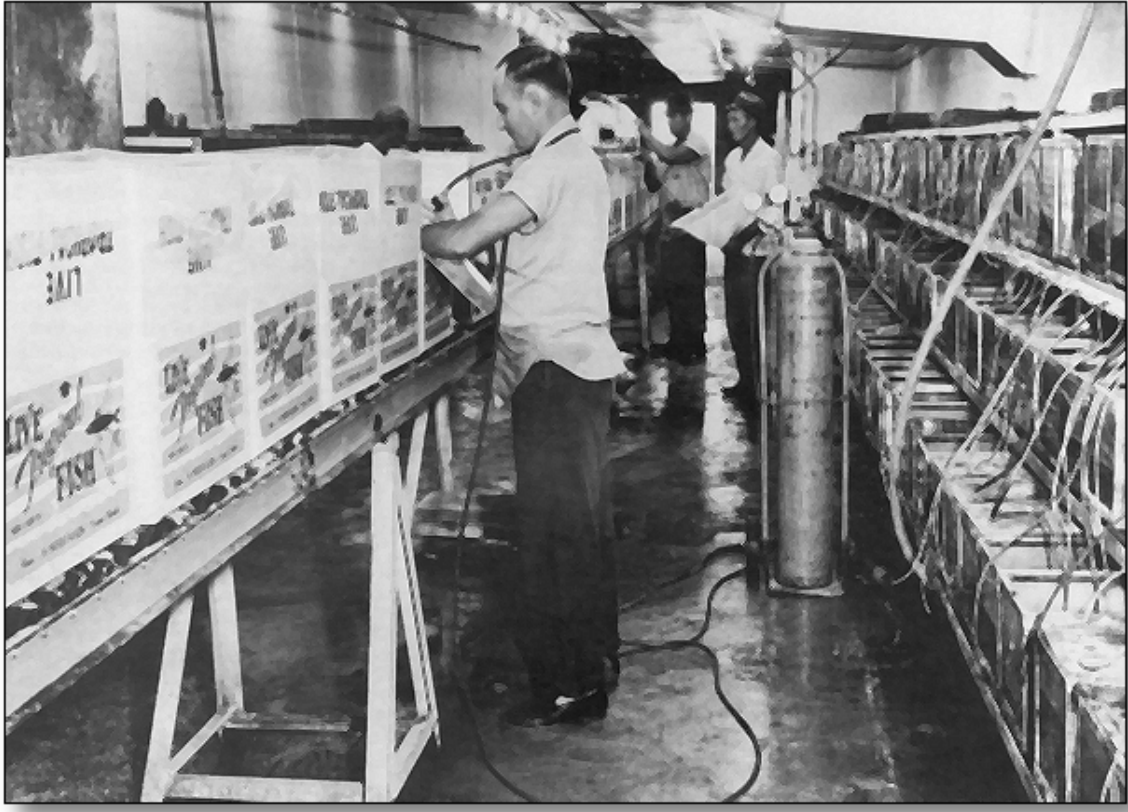
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OF FISHES AND MEN

By ROBERT E. SIMS



PREPARING FISH FOR SHIPMENT
...H. B. Woolf and Son Hatchery

"Little fishes can bring big bucks" must have been on the minds of two men, a Chicago-based worldwide chemical salesman and a Union, New Jersey pretzel factory owner, as they migrated to Hillsborough County, Florida during the height of the depression years.

Albert Greenberg, the chemical salesman, a world traveler whose hobby was the collection and propagation of exotic aquatic plants, had visited Florida numerous times during the course of his business travels. Like many others during the middle 1920s

he speculated in Florida real estate and among other holdings he owned a four-acre parcel within the city limits of Tampa and another larger piece near Adamsville in south Hillsborough County.

In 1933 the chemical firm, Greenberg's employer, declared bankruptcy and ceased operations. Out of a steady job, Greenberg decided to go into business for himself. With only meager savings to back him, he began turning his hobby, aquatic plants, into a business. Operations were begun at the four-acre Tampa site under the name

Everglades Aquatic Nursery; address, 708 Plaza Place, Tampa, Florida.

Norton Jennings, the young firm's first employee, tells us: "It was depression time and I needed a job, any job. Somebody told me about Mr. Greenberg trying to dig pools and build a building by himself. So I went by and asked for a job of helping him. He told me he didn't have much money; he could only pay me a dollar a day. That was all right with me. One dollar was better than no dollar. I worked seven days a week and was paid seven dollars. We dug those pools and built the building and we planted plants. Before long we were harvesting plants and selling them."

Everglades Aquatic Nursery did raise and sell some tropical fish, but the propagation and sales of aquatic plants was Albert Greenberg's first priority.

GUPPIES STARTED IT ALL

At about the same time Greenberg and Jennings were digging pools in Tampa's sand, a pretzel factory in Newark, New Jersey caught fire. But let us not concern ourselves with the damage to the bakery, but let us look through the burned-out floor to the basement below where was housed, of all things, a tropical fish hatchery. The fire occurred in December, the building's heat was cut off, the basement flooded and frozen. The fish, thousands of them, were dead.

Herbert B. (Jim) Woolf, Jr., the son of the pretzel baker, had been given a pair of guppies and an aquarium on his twelfth birthday. The boy had been fascinated with his new interest and soon the single tank became many until an entire section of screen porch was taken over. Before long

Mr. Woolf, Sr. became interested and suggested to his son they turn the basement of the bakery into a hatchery and open a small retail outlet.

The venture met with moderate success. In fact the retail sales demand soon exceeded the production of the basement hatchery. Fish were purchased from wholesalers for resale.

At that time most fish sold in the U.S. came from Hamburg, Germany. They were shipped by boat through the Panama Canal to Los Angeles. An employee would accompany the shipment to ensure the cans stayed warm, the fish were fed and the water filtered.

Any fish produced in the U.S. were raised in the north, either in indoor tanks or outdoor pools and had to be taken indoors by September.

FLORIDA IS CALLING

Then came the bakery fire. The basement and all the fish, breeding stock included, were gone and no insurance to effect replacement. The retail outlet continued to be moderately successful, but the Woolfs wanted to raise their own fish for resale. Finally it was decided, they would come to Florida and raise fish in the warm, tropical climate for sale at their Newark store.

Mr. Woolf loaded his family's possessions, his wife, Hilda, and teenage son, "Jim", into a large, black van that had been used to deliver pretzels and other foodstuffs to neighborhood taverns in the Newark area (I remember it well. Across the rear painted in large, white letters was "HIT ME EASY, I'M FULL OF NUTS") and headed south.



THE FISH BREEDING HOUSE
...H. B. Woolf and Son Hatchery

"Looking back on it", pondered Jim Woolf, "I can't understand why he moved us down here lock, stock and barrel. Why he didn't come down here on a trial basis, I'll never know."

Their first Florida venture into the tropical fish hatchery business was the purchase of a very small defunct hatchery near Gibsonton. The operation consisted of three pools and six concrete vats. But bad luck continued to dog them. The first year, November, 1934, there was a hurricane and the following winter, a freeze. As Jim put it, "One flooded us out and the other froze us out."

The small hatchery was closed down and a retail store was opened in Tampa on

Lafayette Street (Kennedy Blvd.). Once again Jim Woolf tells it as it was:

"The store was nice, but no business; no money. Up north people engaged in their tropical fish hobby during the winter months when the cold weather confined them to their homes. Down here the people are outside year around.

"By the summer of 1936 we were broke. I didn't even have a yearbook at my graduation from Hillsborough High in 1936. We couldn't afford it."

Jim doesn't remember how or why, but he found a 20-acre tract on U.S. 41 at Adamsville that was perfect for a large scale hatchery. The land had been cleared and a

flowing well on the property had enough pressure when its valve was opened to push a stream of water 25 feet into the air. The water maintained a constant temperature in the 70s, a big help during cold weather.

H.B. Woolf, Sr. was disgusted, discouraged and tired. His pretzel business and northern fish hatchery had burned down. His small Florida hatchery was flooded and frozen out and his Tampa retail outlet was operating in the red. He was ready to pack his family and their belongings back into the bakery truck and head north. But young Jim had found the 20 acres at Adamsville and was sure "THIS WAS THE PLACE."

HANDSHAKE AGREEMENT

Senior and Junior had a long talk upon Jim's graduation from high school. Finally the elder Woolf left it up to his son, should they stay in Florida and raise tropical fish or return to Newark and the pretzel business. Upon a handshake they agreed, father and son, to stay in Florida. That is how the firm of H.B. Woolf and Son was founded.

The Woolfs reached an agreement with Albert Greenberg (Everglades Aquatic Nursery), the owner of the 20 acres, to buy his property and suddenly they were back into the tropical fish hatchery business. But just because you own 20 acres of cleared land with an artesian well on it does not mean you own a hatchery-. Pools had to be dug, breeding and warehouse buildings had to be built, pumps, pipes and hoses were needed. A tractor was built from an old wrecked passenger car. Concrete and glass vats were needed for breeding some varieties of fish and on, and on, any number of articles that were essential. And then after everything was in place, breeding stock had to be obtained. All this cost money, a

commodity of which the Woolfs did not own an abundant supply.

The Tampa retail store was closed down and equipment (tanks, small air pumps, etc.) was transferred to the Adamsville facility. Everything that could be used was brought over from the four-acre Gibsonton site and the property sold. Money was borrowed wherever it could be had and material and equipment purchased. Young Jim recruited a number of his Hillsborough High School friends to dig pools in the hot, late summer sun. (I remember it well, I was one of those boys!) Suddenly, it all came together; everything was right and the Woolfs could see the light at the end of the tunnel. But they still had a long way to go.

HARDSHIPS OF WAR

Now in 1937 there were two Hillsborough County firms, H.B. Woolf and Son and Everglades Aquatic Nursery producing fish and plants for northern hobbyists. Both businesses flourished, but then came World War II.

The demand for the products continued through the war years, but the suppliers were hardpressed to keep up due to two elements beyond their control - manpower and transportation. All the young men were entering the armed services and the older men were working at the shipyards. Both Woolf and Greenberg saw their number of employees dwindling to almost nothing.

Jim Woolf had learned to fly in 1938 and at the beginning of the war he obtained a position with the Army Air Corps as a civilian flight instructor at the Arcadia, Florida, air base. Later he flew for Pan-American Grace Airways out of Lima, Peru. Jim's absence from the fish farm was a

hardship, at the time, for the elder Woolf. But in the long run, it proved to be a large plus for the firm's operation.

Transportation of the product to northern markets was a real problem. Everything was moved by rail and the armed services held the priority. Many times shipments -would not reach their destinations on time and the shipping cans would be filled with dead fish. After all, they could survive just so long in their cramped and often cold quarters.

The relief of the transportation problem came in the form of moving vans. Vans would travel south loaded with furniture and household goods and return empty. Moving company's southern agents were delighted to obtain northbound payloads when Woolf contacted them regarding delivering fish to northern markets. The shipping cans were wrapped in blankets and trucks drove straight through to New York, Philadelphia, Boston, Washington, St. Louis and Chicago.

TAKING TO THE AIR

Finally the war was over and the men came home to their jobs. But transportation continued to be a problem for Hillsborough County's tropical fish industry. For some reason rail service did not improve after the war and the availability of empty northbound moving vans was not predictable. Commercial air transport would seem to be the answer.

Two airlines, Eastern and National, served Tampa during the late 1940s and early '50s. For some reason Eastern would not take tropical fish for shipment. National, on the other hand, would accept the fish, but their planes were relatively small and many times lacked space to handle freight. By this time the number of fish hatcheries doing business

in Hillsborough County had increased but the available shipping space had not. The situation was becoming critical, something had to be done.

H.B. Woolf and Son, continuing to be the largest hatchery in the County, had the answer - operate their own airline to move the product to northern markets. This is when Jim Woolf's flying experience paid off.

At first a relatively small twin-engine plane was purchased, but it immediately became apparent the ship was not suited for their needs. In 1947 the firm acquired a Lockheed Lodestar, a former Army plane used to train navigators. It was modified and converted into a freight carrier suitable for their use.

At first, one trip per week was scheduled, one week to eastern markets (New York, Boston, Philadelphia and Washington) and the following week to the midwest (St. Louis, Chicago, Cincinnati). Word spread by dealers pleased with Woolf's speedy delivery service soon reached other tropical fish wholesalers and resulted in more customers placing orders for Woolf fish.

MORE RIDDLES TO SOLVE

By this time the Woolf firm, in addition to their fish were wholesaling plants produced by Everglades Aquatic Nursery. So in effect Albert Greenberg's transportation problems were solved by the Woolf air service.

The plane's capacity was limited to approximately two tons of cargo, therefore it became necessary to find a way to carry more fish and less shipping container weight. At first the fish had been shipped in circular metal cans filled with water. In 1951 with the help of a local container manufac-

turer the Woolfs designed a square waterproof, cardboard container much lighter than the metal can. Using the box with less water than used in the cans, container weight was cut in half. However the system had its downside, too. Less water meant less oxygen for the fish to breathe. To offset this problem, an aerating system pumping fresh air through the water while in flight was installed in the plane. Finally it was found that fish could be shipped in plastic bags that did not need aeration and cut down the container weight to a minimum.

By 1955, H.B. Woolf and Son was operating three Lockheed Lodestars on regular schedules, but it was becoming more and more evident that their operation was becoming too costly. Non-scheduled air freight carriers could be chartered cheaper than the cost of the same run made with their own aircraft. The Lodestars were sold and the fish were shipped via "non-sched" freight carriers.

During the 1960s the nation's airlines converted their fleets to jetliners capable of hauling far more baggage and freight than their predecessors. Now all Hillsborough County-produced tropical fish are shipped via scheduled commercial airline.

By 1953 H. B. Woolf and Son's hatchery had grown to 135 acres containing 1,200 pools and 2,000 tanks. Twenty-seven employees helped to raise and ship 100 varieties of fish.

The senior Herbert Woolf's health had become progressively poorer during the early 1950s until in 1952 he was forced to retire. He passed away at his Davis Island home in 1960. Jim Woolf operated the business alone after his father's retirement until 1963 when he sold the firm to Hartz

Mountain Corporation, who continues to operate it today. Jim now enjoys retirement at his beautiful lakeside home in Lutz.

Meantime, Everglades Aquatic Nursery had outgrown its four-acre operation at 708 Plaza Place, Tampa, and had expanded onto a 20-acre tract known as Eureka Springs, near what is now the intersection of U.S. 301 and Hillsborough Avenue.

Later Albert Greenberg was to turn the business over to Norton Jennings, his longtime trusted employee. In 1967, Greenberg gave 15 acres of the Eureka Springs tract to Hillsborough County with the provision it be made into a County park. He kept one acre on which his home is built and he lives there now in peaceful retirement.

What is the future of the tropical fish breeding industry in Hillsborough County? Jim Woolf replies:

"I think it's good. The market is still there. Those fellows are making more money now than they ever did."

A recent Hillsborough County Extension Service Bulletin states:

"Aquaculture (water farming) has experienced dramatic increases in the U.S. with many Floridians looking at its potential. Currently, Hillsborough County is the uncontested leader in the state's aquaculture, supporting a healthy tropical fish industry. Florida produces an estimated 95 percent of the tropical ornamental fish produced in the U.S., and Hillsborough County accounts for about 90 percent of Florida's production. Centered in the south of the county, producers are growing over 600 varieties of fish. "

"An estimated 20,000 boxes of tropical fish leave Tampa International Airport each week, generating 3-4 million dollars in revenue for the airlines each year, making it the largest air-freight commodity in the state."

One must surely admit the tropical fish industry has come a long way since young Jim Woolf received that pair of guppies for a 12th birthday gift!