You have always loved the wild birds around your rural Texas home but you have never considered keeping even a pet budgie in the house. What would you do with it? Then one pleasant evening a truck backs into the yard and dumps off a bunch of boxes containing 126 huge, hungry, screaming, biting macaws. They are yours to care for. You have no cages, no food, no crocks, no experience, no help—just 126 huge macaws. My God! What to do?

Yes folks, this is a horror story indeed, a true one that took place in April of 1983. Let me explain.

Several years before, in this same rural Texas home, two old men sat around the fire chatting. Inevitably their talk turned to birds and they found they had some things in common. Mr. G.T. McAlpin, a wealthy Texas oilman and developer, had spent years in South America where he learned to respect, even to love the beautiful macaws he watched in the wild. And Dr. C.D. Brown, a veterinarian and professor at nearby Texas A&M's College of Veterinary Medicine, was equally enthralled by the great exotic birds and he particularly lamented the lack of knowledge regarding health care for exotic birds.

The two old men fed one another's dreams and from their discussions three things became clear. First, that the current conservation practices in most of South America were totally inadequate and invited declines of macaw populations. Second, that not enough was known about wild macaw populations for any one to effectively manage the wild birds on a sustaining yield basis. Third, that the demand for wild-caught birds ought to be considerably reduced by captive-rearing programs and by better husbandry and health care of birds already in captivity.

With these points in mind McAlpin and Brown set out to do something positive. I won't touch on the innumerable meetings, the dozens of legal documents, the agreements, discussions, deals and handshakes that took place but the end result was a liaison between private industry and academia.

McAlpin formed a company, Exotic Bird Research Associates, Inc. (EBRA) which formed some agreements with Texas A&M College of Veterinary Medicine (TAMU). TAMU worked out some arrangements with a university in Bolivia, G.R. Moreno University (GRMU). In short, EBRA would fund the project, GRMU would oversee the field work and shipping of the wild macaws, and TAMU would be responsible for health and husbandry studies once the birds arrived in the States. The birds were to remain the property of EBRA but be completely accessible to TAMU. For the sake of brevity I'll call this liaison the Macaw Project.

It was at this point when jeeps and boats were bought, men were hired, permits requested, and money actually began to change hands that McAlpin and Brown ran into a heap of totally unexpected trouble. They were just not ready for the bird industry's fast lane. They trusted people who were dishonest. They depended upon people who failed. They spent money and got nothing. They were misrepresented by some of their own people. To make matters worse, several world respected organizations were a little hasty with erroneous information and unkind, un-
true rumors were floated about. The Macaw Project that had begun as an idealistic dream was being looked upon as though it were a con man's racket.

In truth the Macaw Project was ripped off, cheated, misrepresented, and malign Spain time and again. Dr. Brown's untimely death in December 1982 was another tragic misfortune. Several more hammerblows in quick succession had the entire project reeling and rather down in morale.

Fortunately McAlpin, Dr. Ian Tizard (Dr. Brown's successor at TAMU), and Dr. Benny Gallaway and his wife Nancy (Nancy is McAlpin's daughter) proved to be tough customers and stuck with the Project. It is also greatly to the credit of the officers of Texas A&M University that despite much adverse publicity the school did not bow to the ill-informed public pressure.

"O.K., Dingle," you say, "so how do you know all this stuff?" A fair question, of course, with a very simple answer. I have heard some of the rumors and read some of the bad P.R. and decided to go to Texas to see for myself.

I visited Dr. George C. Shelton, Dean of the College of Veterinary Medicine. I took a grand tour of the TAMU facilities with Dr. Ian Tizard, the TAMU Project Leader. And I spent a couple of days with Dr. and Mrs. Gallaway who represent EBRA and have possession of the birds.

Gentle reader, I looked all of these people square in the eye and found no guile. I studied copies of the papers and legal documents pertaining to the whole Macaw Project from the beginning. I am convinced, intellectually and at the gut level, that the Macaw Project was and is an honorable undertaking if a little naive.

"But what of the Gallaways?" you say. "Who are they?" Innocent bystanders, my friend, innocent bystanders. McAlpin's daughter, Nancy, is married to Benny J. Gallaway, Ph.D., who owns the famous fireside where this whole thing started. Originally the Gallaways had nothing to do with the whole affair. Remember, Nancy didn't even want a budgie in the house for fear the cats would torment it. But when the grand plan went to hell in a handbasket and the best laid plans crumbled about McAlpin's ears what was he to do with 126 macaws coming out of quarantine? Give them to his kid to take care of, naturally. Thus Benny and Nancy Gallaway became victims of a life-changing drama involving a truck, boxes, birds, and a front yard one pleasant Texas evening. Things will never be

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the same again, believe me.

The Gallaway property is large, wooded, and quite close to the university so the location is ideal. And since April of 1983 when they started with zero experience and little equipment, the Gallaways have made much progress. With little help and lots of trauma the Gallaways have condensed about ten years worth of aviculture into a year and a half crash course. It has taken its toll but under the circumstances we’ll forgive Gallaway his shaky hands and desperate expression of the eye.

At the time of my visit the macaws were housed in very satisfactory holding pens and breeding aviaries. The birds were all in excellent feather and physical condition. A private veterinarian in San Antonio as well as the

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A group of scarlet macaws in a roomy holding pen.
veterinarians at the college were monitoring the health of the birds. The birds had been surgically sexed and many pairs set up to breed. Additional aviaries were under construction. In short, the immediate needs of the birds had been well satisfied and it was time to take a breath and look to the future.

I don’t think anyone will deny that the TAMU/EBRA Macaw Project originated and took off almost in a vacuum. Many of the problems the Project encountered had already been solved by others. Indeed, it has been said that the Macaw Project re-invented the wheel. The project personnel, to their cost, failed to realize that there were many other institutions and persons who were also interested in macaws and who had experience.

But the past is past and the price has been paid. The Macaw Project has had its naiveté stripped from it and not gently. It has regained its balance now and stands looking to the future. But what of the future?

Well, I don’t have a crystal ball but I do have a lot of optimism. And I also have a number of valid reasons for expecting the TAMU/EBRA Macaw Project to move into a bright future. First, the Texas A&M College of Veterinary Medicine is a large and important force in the field of animal health and it is strongly committed to developing a very extensive exotic bird health research program. In fact, TAMU, I was surprised to learn, even now does much lab work on birds sent to them by California veterinarians. TAMU is determined to improve the status of exotic avian medicine and I trust they’ll do it.

Second, the majority of the macaws are in the possession of Dr. Benny and Nancy Gallaway who are totally committed to the welfare of the birds. The colony is located on their rural, wooded property very convenient to the university but far enough off the beaten track to comprise what I consider an excellent location for a breeding farm. McAlpin’s emergency choice of location for the birds was a wise one, after all.

Third, and it is pure coincidence, Dr. Benny Gallaway is by training and profession a wildlife ecologist. He is president and senior ecologist for a company that has been commissioned to design and implement ecological studies of wildlife and fishes all over North America. He has studied the only U.S. snow goose nesting colony, bowhead whales, various sea birds, tundra birds on the arctic north slope and many other wild subjects. He is a specialist in...
the management of wild populations. Indeed, he feels that the scientific community should be responsible for providing realistic data regarding wild populations. And once that data becomes known, of course, aviculturists must regulate their demands within the obvious parameters. Dr. Gallaway is a scientist and aviculturist who can do much to bring the two camps closer accord. He has, in fact, discussed with me several exciting concepts that may prove to be true breakthroughs in macaw conservation but they are each worthy of a separate paper at a later date.

The fourth reason I anticipate a bright future for the Macaw Project is the just-announced liaison between the Project and Robert J. Berry. All of you know of Bob Berry, Curator of Birds at the Houston Zoo, private aviculturist par excellence, leader of the A.F.A. Conservation Committee, recipient of several prestigious honors and awards for avicultural achievements, and Professional Fellow of AAZPA. Robert Berry has just accepted an Adjunct Professorship at Texas A&M College of Veterinary Medicine and a position as Avicultural Consultant with EBRA. This means that the Macaw Project now has available the most expert guidance that could be gotten. Even if he lived in Alaska, Berry would be the very man for the job. Coincidently, he lives in Houston which is close enough for effective communication. Up until now the Macaw Project has re-invented the wheel and spun it a lot. With Berry’s experience, thoughtfulness, and conservation-minded vision I expect the Project to get its wheel in gear and move out. We all shall watch with keen interest.

And my fifth reason for optimism is the continuing support of G.T. McAlpin. He knew the program was right when he began it and he has stuck with it through some rocky times. Despite some undeserved personal abuse McAlpin never snapped his purse shut. Even now, poor health aside, he continues to fund the project that will ultimately benefit many aviculturists as well as the birds. McAlpin has thus far invested about $400,000.00 in the Project.

Many regrettable things have happened that would have broken the hearts of lesser people but the gauntlet has been run and the way ahead looks clear. I am confident that G.T. McAlpin will one day look back in great satisfaction and feel that the investment in money, tears and toil has paid off in full.\*