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The A.F.A. Visits—

Frank Miser's Magnolia Bird Farm

by Sheldon Dingle,
Norco, California

I have often heard it said that the A.F.A. was formed to protect the backyard aviculturist and that the commercial people could take care of themselves. In my opinion it is wrong to polarize the bird fancy into the commercial and the "pure." Everyone, including backyard breeders, who buys or sells even one bird is involved in commerce. The principle is the same, the main difference is volume and the fact that the professional dealer bought a business license, pays overhead, and pays taxes on his profits. It is almost impossible to find an avicultural "purist" nor is there any special virtue attached to him if found.

In my opinion the A.F.A. has a responsibility to the bird industry as a whole and that businesses like Frank Miser's Magnolia Bird Farm are a very important part of the industry. Indeed, the health of American aviculture can in many ways be measured by the health of

the commercial bird trade. Responsible dealers buy the breeder's excess birds and are the source of new and different birds. The dealers bring various seeds and other necessities from all parts of the world and present them in one place for the breeder's convenience. Consider the difficulties of doing this by yourself.

Birds are a big business now, along the lines of the horse and dog industries. Occasionally the "A.F.A. Visits" column will feature a professional businessman who deals in birds and bird related products. Just as I would not publish a visit to a beat-up backyard bedlam posing as an aviary so too I would not feature a business that I had any doubts about. I've never met a more fair and honest man than Frank Miser nor seen a bird business run cleaner and tighter. And Frank's been in business for a long time.

In fact, it was over 25 years ago that Miser got into the bird business by accident. In 1955 he and his girlfriend built

The front of the new store.



Photo by Loren Price

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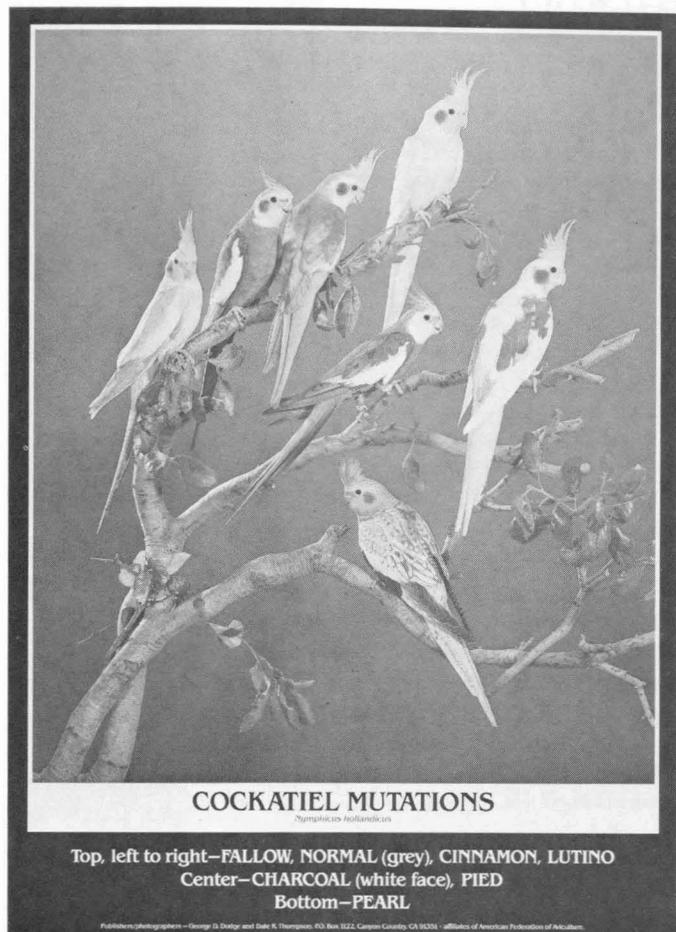
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a 4' x 6' aviary and started breeding 13 budgies including the old house pet. The aviary (situated on the very property where the new Magnolia Bird Farm now stands) began to produce babies and Frank began hauling them to Los Angeles where he received twenty five cents more per bird than the local market offered. Soon he began hauling birds to L.A. for other breeders also, at a ten cents a head commission. After just a few trips Miser began bringing seed back from L.A. for his friends and neighbors. He made one dollar per 100 pounds.

To make a long story short, the day came when Frank was making almost daily trips to L.A. and selling seed from his girlfriend's house. All the while he was building more and more aviaries to hold birds in. Finally the day came when he called his boss and said that he was so busy with his hobby that he didn't have time to work.

By now the enterprising couple had married and bought the property from her parents. The fledgling bird business was a hand to mouth affair for quite a long time with Frank borrowing money weekly to buy birds. He'd sell the birds and repay the loan the same day. Gradually the business built up and began covering its own expenses with a little left over.

The point is that the large, very successful business one sees today did not just drop out of the sky into Miser's lap. He began with one flight and built the business up slowly. It has been an almost thirty year project.

At present Magnolia Bird Farm deals mainly in birds for the pet market—budgies, cockatiels, finches, doves, pigeons, parrots, canaries—species that you commonly find for sale

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in pet stores. Of course a number of rare and expensive special birds can be found at Magnolia but the great volume is in the pet birds.

Seventy percent of the common birds are acquired from local southern California breeders, twenty percent are gotten from quarantine stations and ten percent are bred and raised on local bird farms owned by Frank Miser or Frank Jr. All of Magnolia's male singing canaries are raised on one of the farms.

One important thing Miser does is to insist that his local suppliers run a sanitary operation. He will help breeders learn how to monitor their flocks and to identify and treat common health problems. Once the birds arrive at Magnolia they are inspected and if they are accepted they are housed in clean outdoor aviaries and watched carefully. This is no small feat as there are normally 4000 birds on the premises with a turnover of 3000 per week.

Most of these birds are shipped to pet shops and jobbers all over the country. Many breeders also buy foundation stock from Magnolia. Miser is happy in the thought that he almost never loses a customer. He sells them quality birds at a low price—not *cheap* prices—and his customers are very satisfied.

If Miser's customers are happy it must be said that so are his employees. Among the 20 employees are a son, a daughter, a sister, a niece, and a cousin, but the reason they stay on has nothing to do with kinship—they are happy in their work. One employee has been there seventeen years and several have over ten years seniority.

Even with large amounts of shipping, Miser says he has no shipping problems—no airline hassles, no dead arrivals. He ships an average of 60 orders per week totalling about 140 boxes. He calls each customer after each shipment to make sure there have been no problems.

Although Magnolia Bird Farm is well known all over the country Miser is not a big advertiser. Most of his customers have learned of him through word-of-mouth. He does have small ads in a number of avicultural journals but I think that's just another way he supports the various bird clubs and journals. Miser has always been very active in the local bird clubs and has developed over the years a reciprocal relationship with hundreds of California aviculturists. The breeders do much to supply Frank with birds and Magnolia Bird Farm has become the complete breeder's supply store stocking feed, seed, and all other supplies needed by a breeder.



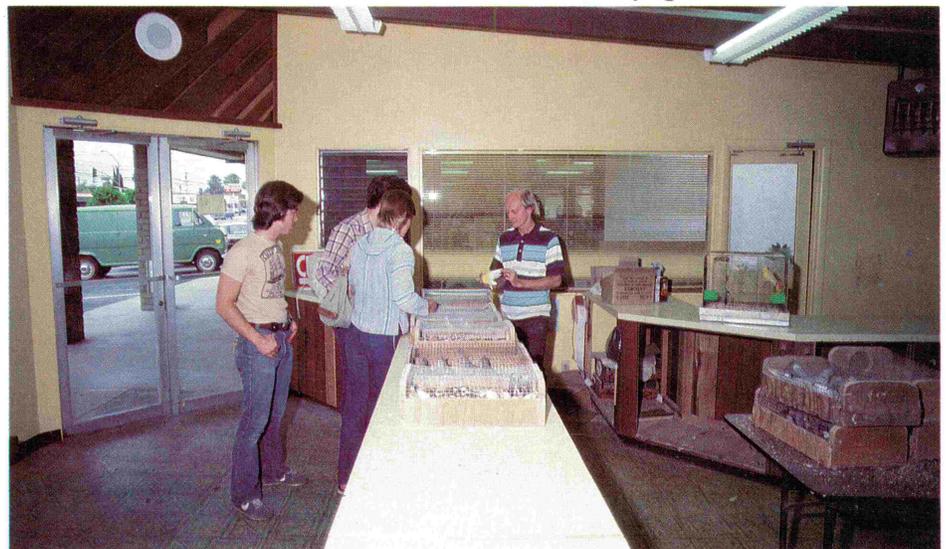
Photos by Loren J. Price

Frank Miser and a pair of hand fed tritons.



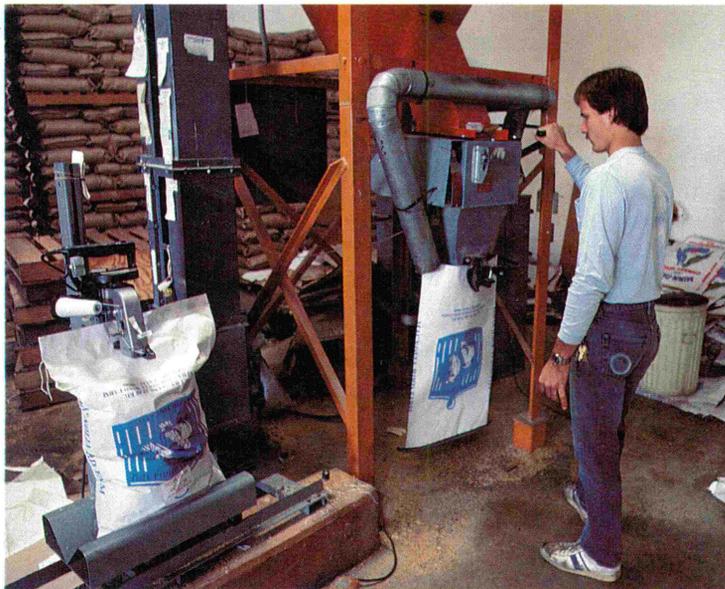
The new outdoor aviaries on the second floor of the new store.

The old store has been remodeled and is now used as a bird buying room.





Birds in shipping boxes with plenty of seed, etc.



Photos by Loren J. Price

Jim Price (Miser's son-in-law) packing seed at warehouse where Miser mixes his own blends.

A group shot of Magnolia's crew.



I think it can truly be said that Frank Miser's buying prices are the baseline that determines what most southern California dealers pay the breeders. If a dealer needs a lot of cockatiels he will pay a dollar or two more than Magnolia. If he has too many birds on hand and doesn't want to buy, he'll offer a few dollars less than Magnolia. Many breeders play hopscotch, hauling their cockatiels or lovebirds all over three counties trying to get the top dollar. Then in the summer when the market crashes they have nowhere to go. Miser's *regular* suppliers don't have this problem. When they supply Frank even though they might get a dollar or two more somewhere else, Frank will buy *all* their birds even when other dealers are not buying at all.

One of Miser's pet peeves has to do with bird prices. He says that some breeders feel that dealers make too much money on birds. These breeders advertise and sell their birds for a few dollars *more* than wholesale and a few dollars *less* than retail and this plays havoc with the market. On his rounds Frank buys birds for say, \$20.00. He then sells them to his store for \$30.00 and the store sells them for \$60.00 retail. Miser says this is a formula that is fair to everyone. Breeders who try to sell retail for less than the \$60.00 in the long run depress *all* of the prices for everyone. Dealers try to keep prices up for the benefit of the breeder also.

Miser expects aviculture to continue its rapid growth unless the government stops it. The only reason the government might step in is the Newcastle's disease caused by smuggled birds. He feels that smuggling is the single greatest threat to aviculture and we should do everything in our power to stop it. He says to ignore smuggling is like playing Russian roulette with one bullet in the chamber and snapping.

Twenty five years ago no one raised any birds for sale except budgies. Now there are four or five species of domestic birds being raised for the pet trade and many other species are being raised in some numbers. In the future the wild bird trade will cease to exist and all commerce in birds will depend upon what is raised in our aviaries.

We, who love birds and enjoy the hobby of breeding them must recognize the role played by honorable bird dealers and give them their just dues. Without legitimate bird dealers like Frank Miser our hands would be tied and our hobby greatly restricted. Hats off to Magnolia Bird Farm and others like it. ●