

66 Years and Counting

Member Bio by Robert Channen, KVAS (r.channen@sympatico.ca). Accompanying photo by the author.

The year was 1943, I was 10 years old and in grade 4. My family had moved recently to Whitby. A favourable turn in the war was very much on all our little minds. We had large maps on our school blackboards and each morning we coloured in the areas that the advancing allies had taken. One day my Dad drove to nearby Oshawa and took me along for the ride. We visited a big Woolworth's store and it was there I first saw a display of tropical fish for sale. It was love at first sight. I had enough saved from my paper route so promptly bought my first tank. Days later, I returned to Oshawa and bought 2 black mollies, 2 angels, 2 zebras and 2 golden barbs. That was the extent of the variety at that time. Of course no-one had a clue about keeping these fellows alive, but fortunately some of us had some experience keeping goldfish. There were no heaters, filters, or live plants, those luxuries didn't appear until years later. But I was hooked.

The other night at our KVAS meeting someone asked me how long I have kept tropical fish --- well the answer is 66 years, considering I am now 76. During all these years I have been *without* fish for only three months, a time I spent up north near the DEW line studying electronics. Up there the only fish available were 24" pickerel, and they were so plentiful that one could catch the day's quota of six within 10-15 minutes. They were so good for breakfast, I will never forget. But pickerel are pickerel and tropical fish are tropical fish, and the two hobbies must never be confused.

During all my school years I was never without a tank or two of tropical fish. As the hobby evolved, more fish species became available each year and the equipment improved. Back then we never imagined the all-glass aquarium of today, we built our own tanks using 1" angle iron and sealed the glass using black putty. Sometimes they didn't leak, sometimes they did. After graduating from high school, I moved to Peterborough and was employed by the Quaker Oats Company. There I constructed a large 5' show tank in the front reception lobby and drove to Toronto for the fish. Plastic plants had now been introduced, so it was a very beautiful tank for its day. Pictures of this show tank appeared in the local newspaper on several occasions and thus the new hobby of keeping tropical fish was introduced to the Peterborough residents. As yet there were no specialized fish stores, one had to drive to Toronto for stock.

In the early 60's my wife and I moved to Kitchener. Our first priority was to find a church home, our second was to find a fish store. I discovered two, both basement stores, one in the home of Fred Theogood on First Avenue, the second in the home of Bob and Dorothy Daniells on Bridgeport Road. Both

were well stocked with healthy fish and lots of aquarium equipment. Bob and Dorothy immediately introduced me to the KVAS where I met with fellow hobbyists for the first time ever. Our monthly meetings were in the Victoria Park Pavilion but soon we moved to the Adult Recreational building (on main floor adjacent to parking lot) where our club started to thrive. It had previously disbanded but Dorothy Daniells and new members including myself were determined to bring it back to life. K-W had a number of good fish people, as did Preston and Hamilton. Frequently we attended their meetings as well and we exchanged speakers on occasion. We were all enthusiastic about expanding our programs and knowledge. Fish shows, while new to me, were great and a lot of fun. We got to know many of the hobbyists from other clubs.

I became KVAS treasurer for a number of years so was very involved in the executive. As the number of club members increased, I soon became part of the program committee. This was always challenging but fun, and I was often up at the front "teaching" new club members how to keep tropical fish. I was contacted by the YMCA to offer a course on tropical fish. Gary Verbaas and I held a number of these 10 week courses, each week on a different subject. We covered setups and general care, water chemistry, lighting and heating, filtration and cleanliness, algae control, live plants, health, disease and medications, how and where to buy quality fish and supplies, spawning, the fish groups and what each group needed to thrive, the list went on and on. It was at one of these courses that Mecia Burden joined, and I always considered her my star student.

Next we set up a visitation group within the club. Anyone from the K-W and area could call KVAS and we would send out two or three knowledgeable members to their homes to help these potential hobbyists with their problems. We met many nice people, fish people really are decent individuals. From these experiences, I started visiting other Ontario clubs as a guest speaker. I guess my most exciting experience happened as a speaker in Willowdale, a club with some of Ontario's most knowledgeable members. I got a standing ovation which was nice. But I found this part of the hobby very disturbing. As in the Kitchener club, a number of individuals kept talking among themselves during my speech which I considered very rude, so I finally threw in the towel and gave up speaking at other clubs.

Instead, I started writing monthly articles for KVAS and my writings found their way to the U.S. Don Dewey, a model airplane friend of mine, started up a new fish magazine called FAMA (Freshwater and Marine Aquariums) and insisted that I join as a monthly contributor, which I did. My subject matter

varied. One of my articles was an interview with Dorothy Reimer of London, ON. It included numerous pictures. The result was amazing, Dorothy became a guest speaker all over the U.S. and Canada, all from one article. She said to me several years later, "Bob, I don't know whether to kiss you or kick your backside". Don actually never changed any of my wording, a bit of a compliment considering he was very particular about accuracy and details.

During these years I joined IBC (International Betta Congress) and attended betta shows all over Ontario and eastern U.S. I worked at becoming an IBC judge, but couldn't attend enough shows per year to complete the requirements. We sadly lost our only Canadian IBC chapter after we held the annual IBC convention in Toronto. There really were some good betta people in and around southern Ontario. I have owned many gorgeous bettas in my day, I took best-of-show with a male red at the IBC convention in Rochester. I still keep a few for old-time sake.

During the past 25 years I have also maintained a marine aquarium for periods of time. I find marine fish easier to keep alive in Kitchener water than many of the freshwater guys. My special marine fish was a lion, an absolutely beautiful fish who actually thought he was a member of our family. He was the household clown. There were many tears shed the day he died, even our dog missed him. And I can't fail to mention a 6" black ghost, a fish I feel was the most intelligent fish I have ever kept. When I came down to the basement, he literally came out to play. He and I would play a daily game of "chase" for 15 minutes at a time. Using my index finger going all over the

surface of the water, he would first chase my finger, then we would reverse and I would chase him around. Being a knife fish, he could swim backwards with the same grace as forwards, with split-second accuracy. It was a performance that had to be seen to be believed.

But my first love in the tropical fish world is the Cardinal Tetra. I bought my first cardinals from Bob and Dorothy for 3/\$1.00. Since they both had eyesight problems, I was allowed to catch my own in their store and I always wanted the big females. Through my interest in cardinals, I got to know Dr. Herb Axelrod (after whom the cardinal was named). Herb, an American citizen, often honoured us Canadians by attending our various shows. As a speaker, there was little that Herb didn't know about in the hobby. It was Herb who gave me the nickname of "Cardinal Bob". I still maintain a show tank of cardinals, and take pride in keeping them alive. This can be a major challenge with cardinal disease so common in our fish stores these days.

The years continue to roll by, the hobby changes, the fish change. That keeps it all interesting. The latest is a beautiful long-finned neon tetra, and it won't be long before long-finned cardinals will grace our tanks. For years I have been watching for a true black betta to appear in one of the shows but maybe such an animal is genetically not possible. Folks, we are in a good hobby. Have fun, learn about your fish, share your experiences, ask questions and welcome new hobbyists. This is what our hobby is all about --- making friends with people who share the same interests in tropical fish. - **Bob**



Robert "Bob" Channen with one of his gorgeous tanks.