

# The Stager's Have a 'Fishy' Business

By Mrs. Charles McSparran  
Farm Feature Writer

Mrs. Henry P. (Mary) Stager of New Providence assists her husband with most of the bookwork connected with an unusual farm business, that of raising goldfish, and delivers fish to customers within Lancaster County. She also goes with her husband to retailers all over their territory to help with store sales promotions.

The business, known as the Hiram Peoples Fish Hatchery, is owned and operated by the Stagers on their 90-acre farm in New Providence. They have about 20 acres in fish ponds, varying in size from the breeding ponds, which are about 10 feet by 12 feet, to the storage ponds, which are about one-fourth of an acre in size. These ponds are fed from a small stream, wells and springs.

This fish hatchery is the oldest and one of the largest in the East. They can ship 100,000 fish in one day. Last year they sold three and a half million fish. They are wholesalers only and are the main distributor in their selling territory. About 95 per cent of their business is with chain stores such as Woolworth's, Grant's, McCrory's, Newberry's and Kresge's. They supply stores up and down the eastern coastal states from Maine to Georgia and from Ohio east to the Atlantic coast. They also supply many pet shops. They did ship fish to London and Amsterdam before the pound was reevaluated and hope to get in that market again.

Stagers employ 15 to 18 men. Some work there part time but four are full-time employees.



Henry Stager dips some goldfish from a box in the summer storage house.

Three salesman-truckers are on the road most of the time. They have two 10 ton insulated tank trucks and four smaller ones. They also ship fish parcel post six days a week. Stager has developed a unique method to ship the fish. Formerly they were shipped in tin milk cans of water which weighed 50 to 60 pounds apiece. Now he ships up to 300 fish in a plastic bag which is inflated, filled with oxygen and sealed. It is then placed in a cardboard carton or a plastic pail and insulated with newspapers. The cartons seem to work out better than the pails. These

containers are much lighter to handle, weighing only about 20 pounds. Fish can live 36 hours in the bags if not exposed to extreme heat.

Peoples Hatchery propagates only cold water fish. Included are Shubunkin, Fantails, Moors, bass and sunfish. The fingerling bass and sunfish are sold for stocking farm ponds. They also sell water lily plants and a complete line of fish supplies such as fish and turtle food which are made to their specifications at Frederick, Md. and in New York state. They employ two women in the packing plant who package the fish and turtle food and pack it in cartons for shipment. They also sell fish nets, ornaments for aquariums, gravel, aquatic plants, water neutralizer, antichlorine pills, pet foods for hamsters, guinea pigs and rabbits and are planning to include other pet foods.

The fish ponds are all drained separately. Their general practice is to drain each pond once a year. They remove the loose soil which covers the bottom of each pond and flush it down the stream. Then the ponds are sterilized with lime.

The men feed the fish each morning and check the ponds for leaks. Meal is fed to the fish in the storage ponds. This brings the

fish to the top of the water to feed which gives them more color. They have to treat the ponds with chemicals for fungus, especially in hot weather. Erosion and muskrats pose somewhat of a problem. The men trap the muskrats in season and large squared timbers are now used to control erosion.

One of the employees is always on the alert when storms occur to close the intake valves to prevent flooding and muddy water from entering the ponds as muddy water can discolor the fish. The men keep the meadow mowed and prepare the fish food for the fish in the summer storage house. They have a special building to cook this oatmeal base feed.

Fish are shipped out all year but spawning is limited to the warm summer weather. The spawning season is usually from May through July. Enough fish must be grown in the summer to meet the year-round demand. They have special spawning ponds where they stake out mats made from two pieces of muskrat wire with a layer of sphagnum moss between for the female fish to lay their eggs on. The spawn is fertilized by the male fish, the mats are removed from that pond and placed in another pond. Anywhere from seven to 14 days, depending on the temperature and weather, the eggs hatch. Some summers the same female fish might spawn as many as 50 times. In other words, the weather plays an important role in the number of fish hatched.

Stagers have three winter storage houses for the fish which are built over springs. The

summer storage house houses about 100,000 fish at a time. The fish are sorted according to kinds and size and kept in separate compartments, ready for shipment. When orders are filled they dip the fish from the water boxes and dump them onto a wet table to be counted.

Henry's grandfather, Hiram Peoples, started the fish business in 1880 as a hobby. He raised carp and sold them to stock streams and farm ponds. He also sold them to Jewish people to serve for the Jewish holidays. It wasn't long until he started raising goldfish instead of carp and goldfish have been raised there ever since. He imported all of the breeders from China and Japan originally because they have the most beautiful and colorful fish. This is because they raise them in small ponds.

Peoples sold his fish to pet shops in the Lancaster and Philadelphia area. He had about 50,000 in a pond and let them spawn on their own. Stagers now get about 400,000 by catching the eggs and hatching them. Stager

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Mr. Stager counts fish on a wet table to fill orders.

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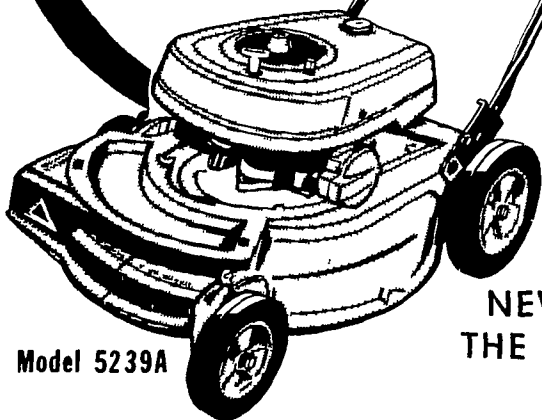
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