

Hamsters, gerbils, goldfish and parakeets - all in a day's work

SILVER SPRING — If you think feeding your family's pets is a problem, consider feeding 12,000 hamsters, or perhaps 2,000 gerbils. That's just a few of the many animals which are fed twice daily at Nolt's Ponds, Inc. near Silver Spring in Lancaster County.

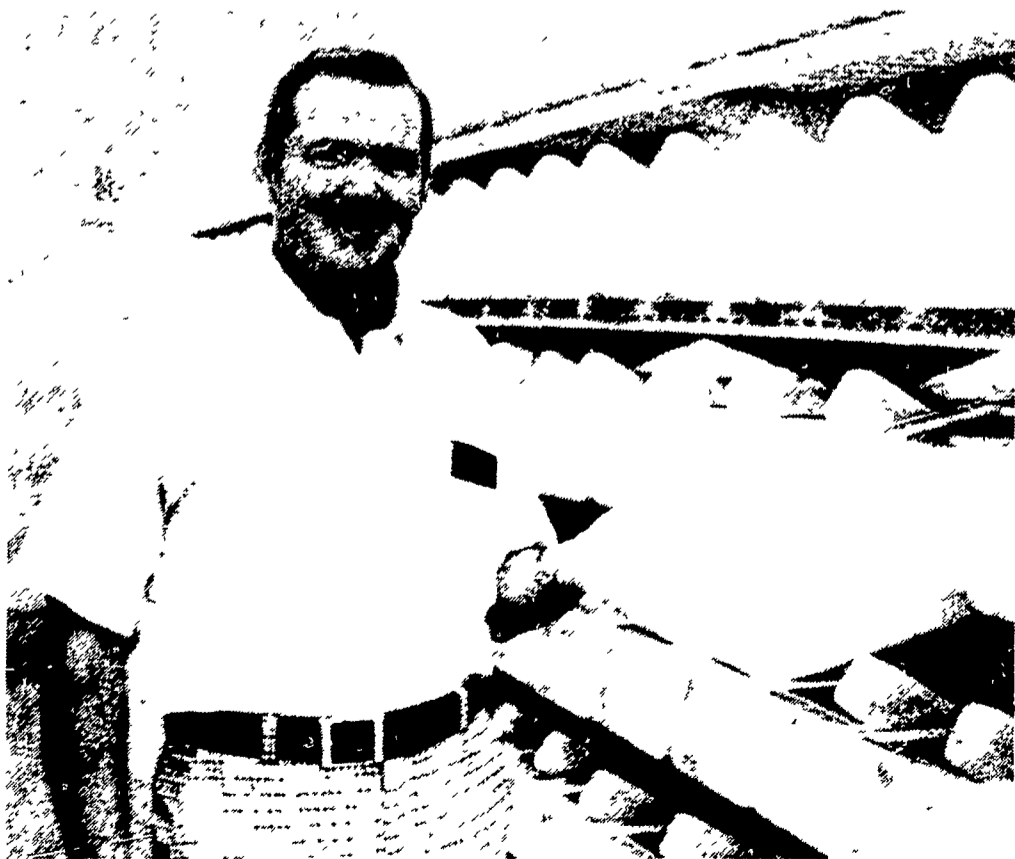
Nolt's Ponds is one of the largest producers of pet animals in the United States, and in addition to hamsters and gerbils, they also produce white mice, guinea pigs and parakeets. They also have a large fish business, handling both goldfish and tropical fish. In fact, goldfish were the foundation of what is now a thriving pet supply enterprise.

"We want to have pets which people can enjoy and which are safe to have around the home. We want them to have the pets and to keep them safely," says A. Frank Huber, Jr., president of Nolt's Ponds, describing their attitude about raising small animals.

Nolt's Ponds is in its fiftieth year of business, and 10 years ago Huber took over the business from his father-in-law, Lloyd W. Nolt. The venture began in the basement of Nolt's farmhouse on Silver Spring Road. Nolt kept goldfish and water lilies as a hobby, but he also sold them to people who had lawn ponds. His small hobby-type enterprise became more well-known through a quirk of fate.

When he discovered some dead goldfish in his pond he called in the county Extension agent for advice. When the water was tested, the agent returned with four state policemen who wanted to know where the still was. It seems that discharge from a still caused the death of the fish. Nolt, of course, had no still, but the policemen traced the source of the problem to a still which had been established nearby. When the story hit the newspapers, Nolt's fish became famous and he received more and more calls from potential customers.

As business expanded, the fish moved from the basement to a garage to a converted tobacco shed which eventually required an addition. "We were in barns all over the place," Huber said. Now the business is located in a modern building with 50,000 square feet of space. The animal breeding operation continues to operate out of the converted tobacco barn. The firm now employs 67 people, and distributes wholesale almost every item needed for pets. Orders are computerized on a "Mini-Computer" which Huber says they've had for about three years.



As part of his daily tasks, Frank Huber checks some of the hamsters which are bred and raised. Later they will be distributed to some of the many pet supply stores.

Nolt's Ponds sells directly to 1100 customers from Cleveland to the east coast and from Watertown, N.Y. to Fredericksburg, Va. However, they also supply distributors around the country, so their animals can be found nearly everywhere in the United States.

Transporting animals, and fish, requires special handling at all points. The major goldfish breeding areas in this country are in the Catoctin Mountain area in Virginia, with its abundance of fresh water, and in the Ozarks in the Missouri. Tropical fish are imported from South America, Hong Kong and Singapore and Florida. Three times a week Nolt's Ponds takes shipment of these fish at the Philadelphia National Airport. Huber said, "Our biggest problems is in the way they are handled, in getting them from the fish farms to customers." Temperature is critical to tropical fish, and Nolt's Ponds trucks are heated to keep a constant, desirable temperature. Huber noted, however, that there is little control over shipments which might not be taken inside promptly at the airport terminal. "Sometimes they are chilled or overheated while being transported."

As soon as fish arrive at the Silver Spring location, they are given preventative medicines and held in isolation for 72 hours to make sure they will be healthy when they are distributed further.

HOMESTEAD NOTES

By SALLY BAIR
Staff Writer



Water in the aquariums at Nolt's Ponds is cared for in an enclosed filter system, which recirculates the water and keeps it free of harmful bacteria. "We have excellent disease control," Huber noted proudly.

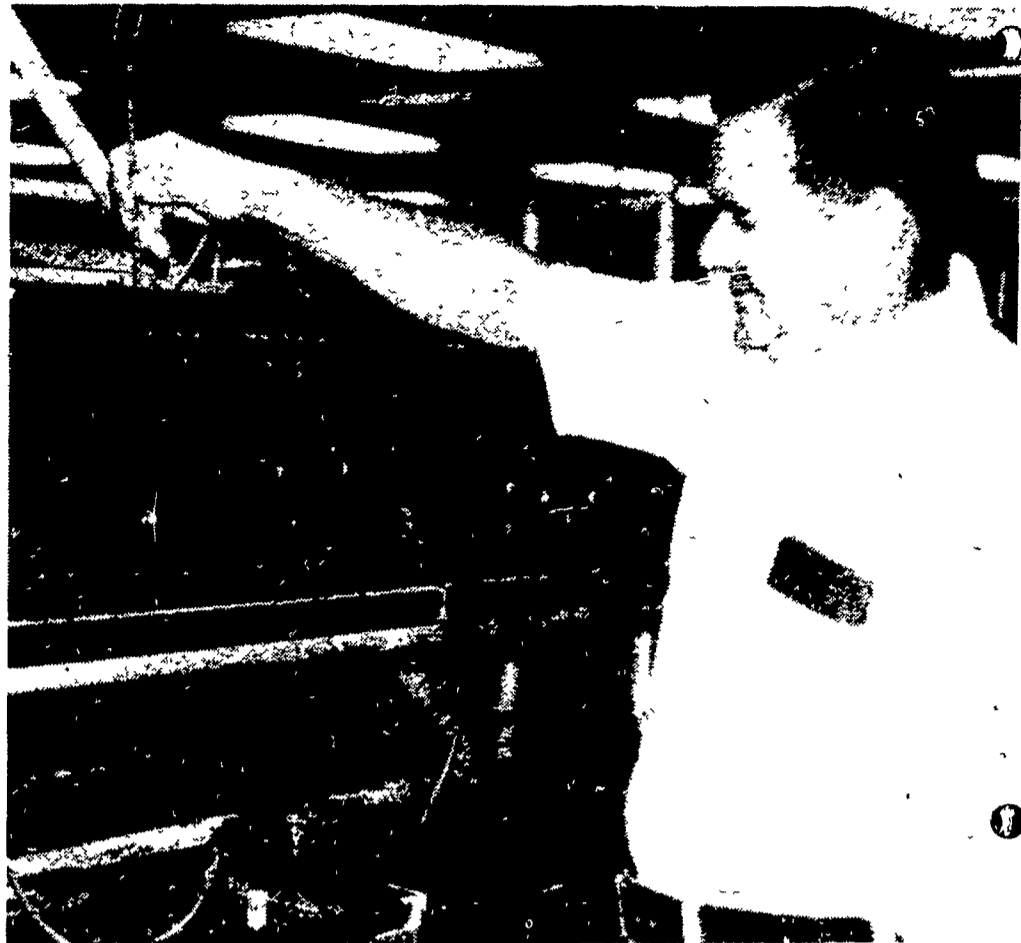
Huber, a native of Lancaster, has a degree in electronics. When asked how he learned about caring for the fish and other animals, he said, "I learned by doing - I did everything." His wife Mary had taken

been president of that for the past two years. He said, "We are the fourth largest pet supply distributor in the United States." The Association helps keep members abreast of legislation which is of concern to them, and helps set standards within the industry.

About five years ago, Huber decided to breed their own small animals. As a result, he said, "We are the second or third largest animal producer in this country." It is small wonder when you consider that they raise about 5,000 hamsters weekly, from 1,500 to 2,000 gerbils, 500 guinea pigs and 2,000 to 3,000 white mice. Parakeets, the newest addition to their inventory, average between 150 to 200 a week.

The animals are bred and raised until time for shipment in the tobacco barn on the original Nolt farm. Adaptations and additions have been made as necessary to house the animals. Huber recalls that they first began raising the small animals in potato chip cans, but presently that did not meet the requirements of the United States Department of Agriculture inspectors, so all the animals are housed and fed in plastic boxes which resemble dishpans with lids. It's quite a sight to enter a room filled with row after row of plastic boxes neatly held on racks four or five high. Each small plastic home is completely cleaned and steam washed at a temperature of 180 degrees F. once a week. Huber noted that even without the frequent inspections by USDA, on the average of every three weeks, they would want to keep the animals and the building as clean as possible to maintain optimum production.

The small creatures require a lot of attention, and they get it at Nolt's. They are fed twice daily and watered, and this



Nolt's Ponds began their business with goldfish as a hobby. Now their fish sales include both goldfish and tropical fish varieties. Here Frank Huber scoops out some of the fish, which are kept in many tanks.

allows the attendants to check the progress of the hundreds of pregnancies in progress. It was an experience for this writer to see day-old hamsters, which are incredibly small!!

There is real breeding selection at Nolt's Ponds. Huber explains, "If we have an animal which does not give birth at an above average rate, we get rid of it. We also get rid of cannibalistic animals. We feel we have good, docile animals."

Huber noted, "There is an increasing market for pets. People have more spare time and can devote more of this time to a hobby. They are educational for young people and relaxing for people of any age."

"Having a small pet can be an inexpensive hobby. You can bring an aquarium home very cheaply." He makes another interesting point, "We find when the economy slows up, business is good because people will spend more for their hobbies."

When asked if advertising is necessary, Huber replied, "We do very little advertising. We've built our business on our reputation." He acknowledged that advertising by name brand manufacturers is helpful to his wholesale business.

One reason for the decision to enter the breeding aspect of the industry, Huber said, was to have "better control over the quality of animals. People who breed animals are the mercy of the market and this is one of the biggest drawbacks for the breeders. We are in a unique position because we can regulate what we need to supply our 1100 customers. We have standing orders for some things."

Parakeets are a relatively new venture at Nolt's Ponds, but Huber said they decided to breed their own because "importation is becoming so complicated with government regulations." He speculates that it will become increasingly difficult to import the birds. To get into the business they bought out and moved a "good strain of breeder birds." With parakeets, Huber said, "space is a big problem. It's hard to house - them properly."

Summer is the slack period in the small pet trade, Huber notes, with September through June being the busier time. January through May are the highest periods of selling, which Huber attributed to the need to be confined indoors. "The weather is not as good and people turn to their pets."

Of course, Huber makes it sound easy, but as he tours the facilities and talks about the animals, it quickly becomes apparent that there are great intricacies in scheduling the gestation periods and rest periods and knowing what to expect from each kind of animal. His "learning by doing" has obviously paid off.

The atmosphere at Nolt's ponds is one of efficiency and caring. They are a unique agricultural industry serving a specific - and special - need.