

FAMA's First 30 Years

Help us celebrate this rare event!

By Lovel Tippit

In January 1978, Jimmy Carter was president; Elvis Presley had just died a few months earlier, and NASA was working hard to build the Space Shuttle program. It seems like yesterday for many of us, even though it predates "Python Water Changers," and the mass collection and sale of live rock. It was an exciting time in the hobby. It seemed like every day there was a new African cichlid or killifish discovery to be made at the local fish shop.

Dr. William T. Innes and his magazine *The Aquarium* were gone after an amazing 40-year reign. This made *Tropical Fish Hobbyist* (TFH) the only American hobby magazine. Yet, TFH relied heavily on European authors.

DeweySketch

FAMA Founder, Don Dewey

ILLUSTRATIONS BY TOM KIMBALL

FAMA's Birth

Then came Don Dewey and his new magazine, *Freshwater And Marine Aquarium* magazine, that would forever be known simply as FAMA. FAMA was different from any other hobby magazine out there, because Don Dewey's vision was different from any that came before. FAMA was the tropical fish magazine "written by hobbyists for hobbyists."

In May 1932, William T. Innes wrote of his own magazine and in his very first editorial penned: "I want this effort to be something more than a business arrangement between subscriber and publisher. To be really successful the partnership must go further than that." No one in the history of the aquarium literature publishing business made the connection between publisher and subscriber better than Don Dewey. Not Roth, Innes or Axelrod. From the very beginning it was clear that this was the people's magazine, and hobbyists responded.

Before the advent of the computer, and ultimately the Internet, the hobby was not as connected as it is today. Clubs were often located in the big cities, making it hard on the rural enthusiast to stay in the hobby loop. But FAMA went everywhere, and it served hobbyists well.

Other hobby magazines such as the ACA's *The Buntbarsche Bulletin* were allowed a voice in the editorial section. Don was unafraid of letting other publications speak their mind in his magazine.

Conservation issues were often addressed. Speaking of Don Dewey, Susan Steele, who became acting editor of the magazine after Don's death, said, "He was definitely a conservationist! I picked up on that and tried to follow in his footsteps." The magazine's dedication to conservation could always be seen, especially in Don's decades-long crusade against the use of cyanide in fish collection. Don didn't let hobbyists off the hook, either. He demanded people get involved if they really cared about the fish they kept and about the hobby in general. FAMA's dedication to conservation is still present today.

Another department that gave hobbyists a chance to participate with the magazine was "For What It's Worth." FAMA understood the sheer joy that hobbyists get out of masterminding little gadgets to make aquariumkeeping easier. "For What It's Worth" created a feeling of community and helped to establish FAMA's reputation as a publication primarily for hobbyists.

Aquarium Society Support

Many might not have realized how far FAMA went to support the little club publications that were printed around the country. The magazine would actually reprint valuable articles and give a donation to the club that originally published the article.

Some very big names in the hobby were part of this program. Lee Finley, a noted hobby author, said, "The first article that I had published in FAMA was titled 'Some Synodontis Species of the Congo Basin' and this had originally appeared in

The Barnacle Chronicle, the publication of the Elm City Aquarium Society. The article appeared in the sixth or so issue of FAMA. Don did send payment — \$25, as I remember — but it was made out to the club, not me. Not a problem, as I was tickled to see the article appear in a slick publication. As it turned out, I ended up contacting Don with the offer to do a second part for the article. He accepted my offer and paid me more than \$25, and so began a long friendship and working relationship with one of the, to my mind, true gentlemen of the hobby. I personally owe a lot to Don and will always consider him a prime mentor in my writing career.”

Good Lookin’

In appearance, FAMA was different from anything that preceded it. Before 1980, TFH used a 5- by 8-inch format, as did The Aquarium magazine before it ceased publication, but not FAMA. From the very first issue the magazine, FAMA used the much larger and sleeker 8- by 11-inch format that quickly became the market standard.

Yet, not everyone would love FAMA’s success and way of doing things. Early on, Don took a personal interest in preventing marine fish collecting with cyanide in the Philippines. As a result, he reported that he had received many death threats for his stance on the issue. This never stopped him, however. He continued to pursue the issue for several years, and the gradual decline in this practice serves as a testament to his tenacity.

In the late 1980s, some small retailers took issue with the big lot pet chains that advertised in the magazine. In fact, a North Carolina fish store began to send a petition around to other stores encouraging them to boycott FAMA, saying that they were not going to give shelf space to a magazine that allowed mail-order suppliers to advertise because the small store could not compete.

In November 1988, the great gentleman Don Dewey had enough and made a reply, explaining that by federal law, FAMA was prohibited from discriminating against an advertiser based on that advertiser’s price structure. While this explanation never satisfied all retailers, Don stuck by it, never attempting to appease anyone. He informed readers that if a favorite retailer didn’t carry FAMA, readers should write in and FAMA would point out the closest retailer that did.

Many old-timers will remember this debate, and it did hurt circulation for a time. But with Don Dewey at the helm, FAMA pushed through.

Marine Midwifery

FAMA’s very first issue ran with a seahorse on the cover. This was fitting, because FAMA would become the how-to magazine of marine aquariumkeeping. It is hard to believe how far that end of aquariumkeeping has come in the last 30 years, and FAMA had a big hand in its development.

In the late 1970s on into the early 1980s, the average saltwater aquarium in America was a white, sterile-looking display, which consisted of dead, bleached, hard corals and a few hardy animals. The lighting spectrum was not commonly understood at the time. Although canister filters were definitely available, undergravel filters that used air instead of powerheads powered most aquariums. Wet-dry filtration, protein skimming and ozonation were all developed by this time, but the average hobbyist didn’t understand the need to employ them.

Mark Clark had this to say, “FAMA represented a new beginning for many marine hobbyists. It was a vital source for practical monthly news. Much of the information available from other commercial magazines was at best of poor quality and freshwater oriented. Pet stores offered only opinions and advice to sell their products. FAMA strived to capture your attention by providing quality unbiased information and an educational experience for the marine hobbyist. Don Dewey understood the need for the marine hobbyist to be able to keep fish alive and healthy.”

In 1986, FAMA first published George Smit’s article, “Marine Aquariums: Is it time for a change?” It exposed American aquarists to European “minireef” systems (i.e., systems designed to hold an entire living reef environment in captivity, not to be confused with the term “nanoreef,” which usually refers to reef tanks of less than 30 gallons). Minireef systems were mostly unknown in the United States at that time, and Smit’s article sent shock waves through the hobby.

Many of us waited with baited breath for every new installment of FAMA that year. Smit’s article, originally scheduled for three parts, eventually ran in seven parts through 1986, and Don consistently referred to it as the most popular article

FAMA had run up to that time.

I remember knowing even at a relatively young age that I was witnessing the birth of a new era. The pictures were like nothing I had ever seen before. Instead of white bleached saltwater displays, George Smit's minireef aquarium was so alive and colorful!

He spoke of using a combination of blue spectrum lighting in conjunction with state-of-the-art filtration systems. I read and reread the words trying to understand. The reef aquarium was born! Later, the importance of protein skimming became better understood in the pages of FAMA. I believe that this was FAMA's most historically significant contribution.

The new FAMA team, from left: Associate Editor Ethan Mizer, Group Editor Russ Case, Art Director Michael Capozzi and Managing Editor Clay Jackson.

The Hobby's Don

It is impossible to separate Don Dewey from FAMA. I asked more than 30 people who had contact with the magazine for their thoughts of the publication's historic significance, and without exception their comments came back to Don Dewey. I asked Susan Steele what she thought was most historically significant about FAMA. She replied, "Only one thing: Don Dewey. He was my hero."

Bob Fenner said, "Other than the 'bard of fishes' (William T. Innes), Don Dewey was the pet-fish magazine editor par excellence. He always had the aquarist's interests foremost in mind. A willing instigator of new and controversial topics and discussion, he and FAMA came out in a time when there was a dearth of useful or practical information from other hobbyist publications. I will testify that Don Dewey was a gentleman and a scholar in our field."

FAMA has been fortunate in regards to the fantastic and noted writers it has featured over the years. Many are still sharing their wealth of experience, such as Gene Lucas (author of FAMA's only remaining original column "Bettas and More"), Paul Speice, Julian Sprung and Bob Goemans, just to name a few.

It is no secret that FAMA fell on hard times after the death of Don Dewey, but FAMA has navigated through yet another storm. Our new editorial staff is second to none. Clay Jackson and Ethan Mizer have remained loyal to the magazine's spirit, and I think Don would be proud!

We here at Freshwater And Marine Aquarium magazine would also like to take this opportunity to thank you, our loyal readers, for 30 years of FAMA. Thanks for the memories and the innovations, but most of all, thank you for allowing us to share this fantastic hobby together!