

AviCulture - The Adventure In Bird Keeping Begins

A look at bird keepers in history

By Dick Schroeder

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This month we begin a new online column — Avi “Culture.” Avi is derived from avian — pertaining to birds. One dictionary definition of culture describes it as “the totality of socially transmitted behavior patterns, arts, beliefs, institutions, and all other products of human work and thought characteristic of a community or population.”

Peafowl were some of the types of bird species brought to ancient Egyptian pharaohs by the Phoenicians.

With that definition in mind, we will explore a variety of people, places and things. Some destinations might be zoos that are bit out of the ordinary, restaurants, hotels or other places to visit that have a bird theme. We'll meet some famous bird people and explore bird art and the artists. We'll find museums with avian art exhibits. We will look into avian collectibles, vintage plates, bird stamps and all sorts of cool bird books. We will seek out all things avian. And, on occasion, we will wander through some ancient history of birds in captivity. It promises to be a fun ride.

The Pet Of Royalty

There has been an interest in keeping birds for thousands of years. For example, I find it interesting that Ancient Phoenicians brought peafowl to the Pharaohs of Egypt and that King Solomon owned some as well. During the reign of Alexander the Great, it was a crime to kill a peafowl, yet during the Roman Empire and the Middle Ages, they were served as food. The first white peafowl mutation occurred in England in the 1700s.

There have even been pet birds in the White House. Theodore Roosevelt had a blue-and-gold macaw as a pet, and I've seen pictures of Roosevelt's young son with what appears to be a hyacinth macaw on his shoulder. (To view this photo, go to: www.whitehouse.gov/president/holiday/historicalpets1/03.html.)

Long before Teddy and family, Thomas Jefferson kept a number of pets; his favorites were mocking birds. He kept four in the President's House, and they were allowed their freedom when he was home alone. When his term in office ended, he took them with him to Monticello and retirement. His favorite was named, appropriately, Dick.

During the Kennedy years, Caroline had pet ducks that roamed the White House lawns. Even George Bush pardoned the Thanksgiving turkey and allowed it to wander the grounds for a time.

Probably the first bird breeders or aviculturists were the people that bred gamecocks for fighting. Evidence in China points to its existence there in 517 BC, and it's thought to have its origins in ancient Persia 6,000 years ago. Although it is a practice I find repugnant, in earlier times it was the “Sport of Kings,” finding favor in Europe and with the royal families of England. It was banned in England in 1834. Even some of our United States presidents bred gamecocks for fighting, including the father of our country, George Washington. Others, including Thomas Jefferson and Andrew Jackson, did as well.

Archaeologists have determined that several of the Native American tribes of the Southwest kept parrots and macaws as early as 300 AD. The Hohokam of the area, which now includes much of Arizona and New Mexico, not only traded with their southern neighbors for feathers, but there is evidence from bones found in excavations that they also kept parrots in captivity.

It's quite apparent that avi “culture” has been around for a long, long time. Let's get ready for some explorations of our own.

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