

## Goldfish Farms in the U.S.

A Series of Articles by Neil Teitler with assistance by Joe Lightcap and Carlos Perez

Most people attribute the development of the goldfish hobby in the U.S. to the importation of goldfish into this country by Admiral Amman of Japan in 1875. These fish were exhibited throughout the East Coast, and formed the nucleus of the brood stock for the Philadelphia Aquarium Society.

Prior to the introduction of the Japanese stock, there were persistent rumors that a strain of American goldfish was established in the mid eighteen-fifties in Cincinnati, Ohio and in Eastern Pennsylvania. These rumors persist to this day, and it is safe to assume that there is some truth to the rumors and that goldfish production in the U.S. dates from the mid-nineteenth century. Early varieties were probably limited to common goldfish and fantails; they were used primarily as promotional items which were used to sell some other product.

The first commercial fishery of record is the subject of the present article, and we will trace the development of early fisheries in the U.S. in subsequent articles. Grassyfork Fisheries, located in Martinsville, Indiana was founded in 1899, and is still in existence to this day. Ownership of Grassyfork was transferred to Ozark Fisheries in 1970, and we will cover Ozark Fisheries in depth in a later article. The famous "Grassyfork Fisheries" sign is shown in the accompanying photograph.



Grassyfork Fisheries was founded by Eugene and Max Shireman, Harry DeTurk and Dwight Ritter. The farm was inherited by Max and Eugene and was originally covered in a series of marshes and fens. Max and Eugene were unable to raise more traditional crops on the farm, due to its poor drainage, so they decided to develop a fish farm. Goldfish were used at the turn of the century for promotional “give away” items, and were sold in department stores, pet shops and drug stores, enabling Max and Eugene to find a ready market for the fish.

The original site is shown in the photograph below.



Management of the fishery operations is similar throughout the world, and the resemblance of the Japanese koi and goldfish breeders to their U.S. counterparts is quite uncanny. The farm consists of a series of breeding ponds, hatchling raising ponds, grow-out ponds and shipping or staging areas. In addition, there are sorting stations, shipping and preparation stations and shipment staging areas.

The accompanying picture shows some of the grow-out ponds used by Grassyfork, and resembles the terraced ponds used in Japan for koi raising operations.



The original holding pens, used to prepare fish prior to sorting and shipment is shown below.



The original shipping room is shown in the next picture; at this time Grassyfork was shipping between one hundred to one hundred fifty thousand fish per day from this facility.



Grassyfork originally produced common goldfish, but expanded its operations to include comets, fantails, Shubunkins and Black Moors. Since common goldfish were used primarily as feeder fish or as promotional items, not much culling was required. When the fancy varieties were introduced, culling became more important, and was done by hand, as is the case in most Japanese koi and goldfish farms as well.

Early in its history, Grassyfork, like other goldfish farms in the country relied on rail transportation in steel buckets shown in the picture above. Fish loss was stable at about 2% of the fish transported, through the nineteen-forties. Gradually, fish losses mounted as other cargoes began to become more important to the railroad industry, and less care was taken in transporting goldfish. In the late nineteen-fifties, goldfish began to be packaged in plastic bags filled with water and oxygen and then over-packed in cardboard shipping containers. This new packaging method revitalized the goldfish hobby and brought losses to acceptable levels. It also allowed fish to be air-shipped economically, and opened up new markets for growth.

The following picture shows the culling operation being performed at Grassyfork.



By 1970, Grassyfork was sold to Ozark Fisheries, which is now the largest producer of goldfish in the U.S. We will continue our series of articles with a feature on Ozark Fisheries.