

This article describing the early history of the AKA was originally published in January 1971 (Killie Notes 4:(1) 22-28). It is of interest to those who have joined the organization since. Killie Notes was a sister publication to JAKA that was merged with the latter in 1974. We thank Ronald Scheline for scanning the original published article and converting it to html format.

A HISTORY OF THE AMERICAN KILLIFISH ASSOCIATION

By Albert J. Klee © AKA, 1971

It would, in my view, be wrong to dismiss this brief chronicle of the American Killifish Association simply on the grounds that one is not particularly interested in killifishes. The fact of the matter is that the AKA has been the most successful aquarium organization in the history of the hobby anywhere in the world, bar none. It is, therefore, relevant to any aquarist interested in hobby organizations, how they get started, what makes them tick, and how they prosper. It is primarily for these reasons that this history is now put to paper

The AKA was not the first serious attempt to formulate a killifish organization of at least national scope. Several years prior to the launching of the AKA, a proposal was made by Alan Fletcher, then Technical Editor of the old Aquarium magazine, that an "American Panchax Association" be formed. Although not a killy authority himself, he had observed the keen interest in these fishes and recognized the value of such an organization to the hobby. The suggestion, however, elicited little tangible response from aquarists. In a sense, this is commonly the experience of many club bulletin editors who plead in print for articles. The response is generally nil, and some editors find that only direct face-to-face requests for specific material are fruitful. Fletcher, however, did approach two well-known killifish authorities but unfortunately, although these two hobbyists possessed the requisite technical killifish knowledge, they either did not have sufficient organizational ability, or lacked the spirit to cope with organizational details, admittedly not always an exciting assignment.

Thus we come to another dictum in hobby organization: It is not always the "expert" who is the most effective organizer. Yet, regardless of organizing ability, the man with the reputation or the "title" is almost automatically chosen to lead. In any event, thus died the "American Panchax Association", stillborn.

In August of 1961, the author's telephone rang: "Hello! I'm Bob Criger. I'm interested in killifishes and wonder if we couldn't get together tonight for dinner?" With this telephone call, in effect, the American Killifish Association was born. Bob, who was visiting his home offices of the Armco Steel Corporation in Middletown, Ohio (some 20 miles from where I lived), projected such bright enthusiasm over the phone that I accepted the invitation and drove to meet him.

Robert O. Criger turned out to be a tall, friendly, personable fellow, lately interested in killies. It turned out that his telephone call to me was triggered by a series of articles I had authored for the old Aquarium Journal (see Klee, Albert J., "A Fresh Look at the Genus *Aphyosemion*", Aquarium Journal, August, September, and October 1960). This particular series was one in which I had invested a great deal of time and effort, for at the time, little information was available with regard to these fishes. Today, I look back at some of the inadequacies of that particular material with some misgiving. We have all learned much about killies since then!

In any event, Bob had read the series with interest, and, knowing that I lived in the area, took a chance, located my telephone number and called me out of the proverbial "clear, blue sky". He was prepared with a list of killy topics for discussion that could have formed the basis for a good-sized book. These were tackled with enthusiasm for in those days, finding persons that were devoted to killies just wasn't easy!

The conversation continued after dinner. We bemoaned the scarcity, not only of information about killies, but of the scarcity of the fishes themselves (today's killifish fanciers are really spoiled by the relatively easy access of these fishes!). Sometime after midnight, Bob thought out aloud: "Wouldn't it be great if we had some sort of club devoted solely to killies?" At first I was reluctant, knowing full well the work involved and that ventures of this sort usually wound up with but a few people carrying the main load, ultimately to fail because of general apathy. Further, the experience of the ill-fated "American Panchax Association" was not unknown to me. However, Bob was particularly interested in developing a professionally produced publication strictly for killies, and as he had had considerable publishing experience and access to processes and printers, his suggestion became persuasive. Then, too, the challenge of developing a really successful national aquarium organization was appealing and ultimately irresistible.

By our fifth highball, we mutually agreed to attempt the formation of a national killifish association. It was decided that Bob would handle publicity, membership, and correspondence, and that he would simultaneously work out plans for a publication; to me fell the task of organization, planning, operations, and By-Laws. On this note we parted, Bob returning to Kansas City, his home at that time.

One of the observations I had made regarding the failure of prior specialist's organizations (sundry national guppy and goldfish groups, and the International Federation of Aquarium Societies in particular), was that they seldom provided opportunities for practical but significant involvement on the part of the rank-and-file. Furthermore, I had observed that these so-called "national" efforts tended to become localized. Since not all hobbyists are affluent enough to attend meetings located far from their homes, the leadership of such organizations tended to concentrate in a limited number of geographic areas, with subsequent areal domination. With Bob in Kansas City and me in Cincinnati, we already had a fair start of sorts on geographical dispersion. A search was then initiated for aquarists living in other areas who were able to contribute to, and interested enough to participate in, a charter committee.

Our first invitation went to John Gonzales, then of Philadelphia. John is one of the real "old-timers" in the hobby. He was, for example, the first American aquarist to breed *Rasbora maculata*. A keener mind and superior breeder of killies could not be found. Due to a chronic back injury, John was forced to retire relatively early in life, but as he could not stand to be idle, he had decided to breed selected groups of fishes for the commercial market, i.e., those fishes requiring too much individual attention for commercial hatcheries to handle. Primary among the fishes he bred were killies.

In Chicago, we found two men with excellent qualifications. One was Charles Glut, an engineer who was gaining a reputation as an "innovator" in the killifish field. The other was George Maier, who possessed an enviable record of years of experience with aquarium fishes, particularly killies. At the time, George (who, with his wife, operated a fish store) was Advisory Editor of the now defunct Tropicals magazine. George Maier, it might be mentioned, is a man for all occasions. His technical craftsmanship is flawless, and his warmth for people unsurpassed.

The next to be invited was Bruce Turner, of New York City. Bruce, then a student at Brooklyn University, lived, ate, and breathed killifishes (he later was to become a professional ichthyologist). He corresponded with collectors and professionals all over the world, and could rattle off the musty references to killifishes in the literature of a hundred years ago with the same facility the more typical teenager rattled off baseball averages. The last member of the Charter Committee was Bernard Halverson, a chemical engineer who had attained a national reputation when he persuaded the Houston Aquarium Society to sponsor the sale of dwarf white worms, then relatively unknown to the hobby. These men provided at least some of the geographical diversity we thought to be critical. It is somewhat ironic to note that we were not successful in obtaining West Coast representation on the Charter Committee. At the time, the killie fires were hottest in the East, and California fanciers were relatively unknown. How this has changed since then!

In order for a committee of seven people, dispersed about the country, to operate without chaos, some system of corresponding had to be devised. Thus, the Charter Committee served as an experimental vehicle in which to work out the modus operandi that basically was to be used by future Boards of Trustees of the AKA. John Gonzales was instrumental in suggesting the technique that finally proved workable. (Briefly, the chairman of the group sends his letter to the others about the first of the month, by the middle of the month the others send their letters, with copies to all. The function of the chairman is to summarize comments, formalize motions, assign motions a number and a place on the agenda, and to conduct and record the vote. Thus, regardless of where a participant resides, he shares involvement in policy-making equally with the others in the group. The chairman has no greater powers than his peers. He is an equal among co-equals, but traditionally acts to minimize discord and to expedite the flow of business, This approach serves to eliminate the one-man-show responsible for the many prior failures of national organizations.).

Many of the individual members of the Charter Committee, as might be expected, had particular interests in the structure of the Association. Charles Glut, for example, devoted much of his time to the concept of the “egg bank”, a system whereby volunteer hobbyists would breed and maintain certain species of killifishes that might otherwise disappear from the hobby through neglect or lack of interest. (The internal debate over egg bank plans was, unfortunately, quite acrimonious.) Bruce Turner applied himself mainly to the organization’s acquisition of new species; George Maier cultivated crucial support from aquarists in the important Chicago area; I occupied myself with the preparation of the By-Laws. All of us, however, actively discussed and debated all aspects of the new organization.

During this time, Bob Criger, acting as publicity liaison officer, contacted all of the national aquarium magazines with a view towards publishing news of the proposed organization and keeping aquarists informed of the progress of the Charter Committee. All agreed to cooperate with the single exception of the Tropical Fish Hobbyist. Although the Aquarium Journal, Tropicals, and Aquarium magazines published many progress reports and announcements regarding the AKA, none ever appeared in TFH.

Aside from the egg bank controversy, a friendlier disagreement arose, concerned with the naming of the new organization. The two main proposals advanced were: American Killifish Association, and American Panchax Association. The problem with “Panchax”, however, was that it was based upon a scientific name long since abandoned by the profession, and applied originally only to a very few fishes. The major objection to “Killifish” was the implication that these animals “killed” other fishes. Such logic, however, when applied to fishes such as “tiger” barbs, tricolor “sharks”, etc., quickly produced a *reductio ad absurdum*, and the Charter Committee voted overwhelmingly to select American Killifish Association as the official name.

The By-Laws of the AKA contained several novel features. A seven-man Board of Trustees was devised as the policy-making force for the Association. For continuity, three were elected in odd-numbered years, four in even-numbered years, and all served two-year terms (an early amendment to the By-Laws stipulated that Trustees had to take at least a one-year “vacation” before they could run again for office). Only members from the United States or Canada could vote or hold trusteeship office (foreigners were considered, of course, but the problems of conducting business via the mails among countries mitigated against it).

An important clause read: “...no more than two trustees of the seven shall reside in the same State in the case of the United States, or in the same Province in the case of Canada”. With one clause then, the new organization avoided the old problem of regionalizing or concentrating power in any one particular area, an occurrence that killed many a prior national aquarium organization. Perhaps even more important was Article VII, “Mode of Operations”, which stated: “Insofar as it is applicable, the business of the Association shall be carried out by written correspondence”. Thus, in the AKA, anyone could run for the Board of Trustees and expect to participate equally with other Trustees if elected. It was no longer necessary to be rich, retired, or both, to fulfill one’s

obligations as a Trustee. One did not have to travel, say, from Alabama to California to vote at a national convention or in vis-a-vis committee. A 6¢ stamp and a little time was all that was required. The By-Laws were adopted unanimously by the Charter Committee.

At the beginning of 1962, prospective members sent in \$5.00 for their first year's dues, voted for seven Trustees and their choice of fish for the club emblem. Fourteen aquarists were nominated for Trustee (based upon recommendations received by the Charter Committee from interested aquarists during the latter part of 1961). In order that hobbyists would know who they were voting for, bibliographic sketches were prepared by the candidates, edited into a standard format by the Charter Committee, and distributed to the voters. This is a commendable practice, still followed by the AKA. The choice of fish for the Association's emblem, by the way, was closely decided between Lyretail and the Blue Gularis, with the latter receiving the nod.

The details of the results of these first elections and the subsequent development of the AKA are to be found in the pages of the Association's publications (particularly Killie Notes). As I do not want to unnecessarily burden the reader (especially non-killie fans!) with such details, they will not be discussed here. Several general comments, however, might be helpful to other national aquarium organizations, extant or proposed. From the start, the AKA's publication program was a resounding success. Killie Notes (a professionally produced offset publication) came first. This was a mixture of topical club news and technical material. It was decided later to separate the two functions, and when the Association had sufficient funds, the publication was discontinued with two new ones taking its place: the AKA Newsletter, and the Journal of the American Killifish Association (JAKA). Because the AKA depends so heavily upon the exchange of fishes and eggs among its members, a booklet entitled Killifishes Exchanges was published soon afterwards. A host of other specialized publications appeared, the most important of which included a Beginner's Guide and the Killifish Index. In short, the publications activity of the AKA has been extraordinary – no other aquarium organization has ever matched it.

One of the most effective instruments for selling killifishes to the public and for recruiting new members proved to be the AKA's audio-visual (slide-tape) program. Sight and sound told the Association's story and the story of killifishes. It was loaned free of charge to responsible hobby organizations.

One of the really vital activities of the AKA was, and still is, its free (to members) egg and fish listings in its monthly newsletter. This enabled fanciers all over the world to obtain, exchange, and even sell many different species of killies. From a historical standpoint, however, two species of killies in particular spurred special interest in the hobby in the late 1950's and early 1960's. Indeed, they were partly responsible for the founding of the AKA in that they created general interest in the family. These species were *Aphyosemion filamentosum* and *Aphyosemion gardneri*, the former because it was a new, reasonably-sized and easily-bred "bottom spawner" (bottom spawners being relatively rare at the time); the latter also was an easily-bred fish but in addition, it was a brightly-colored and exciting new "top-spawner" introduction. The AKA should really erect a monument to these two species! Another species important to the early AKA was the Blue Gularis. It was a natural "salesman" for the AKA!

The AKA has come a long way since 1961, and it has since seen the participation of many hobbyists from all over the world. In a sense, the new killifish hobby is quite different from the old killifish hobby when I can remember paying \$10 for a pair of *Aphyosemion bivittatum* in the days when \$10 was equivalent to \$20. The species available to hobbyists today would simply amaze the hobbyists of a generation ago! Those of us, however, who were privileged to assist in the formation of this great organization almost 10 years ago, will never forget those difficult but fascinating days of its birth; assuredly, we all treasure having had a chance to serve.