

Aquarium Operator Finds Life Is Exciting

By Wally Trabing

How would you like to make a midnight check of your place of business some night and find an octopus walking across the floor?

Of course, you'd probably have to be in the aquarium business to run onto such a situation, but it actually happened to Del Rawls who runs an aquarium on the municipal wharf in Santa Cruz.

In the eerie glow of concealed lights, Rawls, making his nightly check once saw 80 pounds of slithering body and tentacles sidling across the floor, heading for parts unknown.

With a bit of nerve and the fortitude that has been necessary to turn a carpenter into an aquarium keeper, Rawls wrestled the eight-armed monster back into his tank.

"He was the travelingest octopus I ever saw," recalled Rawls. "He lived in captivity for a year and 10 days, a record, I believe, that only the Hamburg, Germany, aquarium has beaten."

And if you think that sealife keeping is a gentle art, the tall ex-carpenter will show you scars to change your opinion.

In the two years he has played nursemaid to creatures of the ocean Rawls had his flesh torn by the beak of an octopus; been bruised on the leg by a bash of an alligator's tail; had his hand infected by the sting of an sculpin fish; been jolted with electricity from an electric ray ("like touching a spark plug"); had a hand filled with "cactus" from a sea urchin; been bitten by a shark and been nipped by a sea lion.

Rawls always had a love for animals and sea life. It was a hobby with him until one day he fell while doing construction work and cracked his neck. Cut off from further heavy work, Del decided to take the

enough, a thick skinned alligator's water can't be colder than 60 degrees and a thin skinned octopus' tank can't be warmer than 60 degrees.

He discovered, to his horror, one night, that if his 14-gallon-a-minute pump quits, a good part of his aquarium population will die within hours.

He has 10 tanks in his building now, built up in a long financial struggle that has survived mostly because of his love for his work.

An aquarium, says Rawls, has a population turnover similar to that of a hotel. Some of the fish have a long life and can withstand the rigors of captivity, while others do not last a week.

Rawls obtains his specimens from fishermen, skin divers, and by personally "prowling" the bay with local commercial boatmen, keeping an eye open for unusual objects in the nets.

Further fascination is added by the fact that Monterey bay reportedly has a larger variety of sea life than any other body of water in the world.

He even picks up a great variety of unusual fish in his trap he drops under the wharf to catch crabs for his octopus.

This week he pulled up a pipefish, which looks like a piece of pipe with a mouth and eyes. The female of this species deposits her eggs in a pouch carried by the male who then hatches them. Rawls' fish is now in that process.

At present Rawls' tanks are filled with a variety which includes cabezon, balinka junka, cod, sea trout, deep sea clams, midshipmen which lighth up at night, electric rays, many kinds of star fish, a blow shark and turtles.

He has a fascinating display of

anemone, beautiful sea plants that live and trap their food in their flowering arms. There are dozens of tiny coral and flowers which move about the tank waving their "blossoms" and suddenly sucking them into a tube when a tiny fish or sea life comes within their grasp.

There is an awesome alligator turtle which waits motionless with its mouth frozen open. Mother nature made its tongue resemble a worm which the turtle wiggles to lure small fish into its cave-like mouth—then crunch!

He even collects new specimens through the water that is sucked up for the tanks. He finds sea urchins and fish which have seeped in as tiny babies and have grown to adult size in the tanks.

Rawls' pride and joy are four circus seals and a leopard seal. The leopard seal is "Cuddles" which was found on the beach above Davenport as a baby.

He had Cuddles' picture made up into 25,000 post cards which have been sent throughout the U.S.

The pitiful lack of room in the aquarium is evident when the seals are considered.

High rent and upkeep have kept Rawls from expanding. He would like to put his seals to work in a public display near the aquarium.

He has had offers from many contacts for sea animals of all kinds, but again lack of room has curtailed all this.

His wife, Dot, and a son, Richard, and daughter, Jean, help with the round of work involved in the aquarium.

At their home on 46 National street, the atmosphere changes. There's a raccoon, a fox, a bobcat and — well that's another story.

Seal Likes To Eat—So It Learns



Del Rawls teases one of his circus seals with a piece of fish. He is figuring on training the seals for public shewing at his municipal wharf aquarium. He is eyeing a corner under construction next to his aquarium.

Sea Anemones Are Attractive—But Hungry

