

Oscar, ~~Oscar~~, Oscar

by BERNARD HARRIGAN

In my head I could hear Felix Unger admonishing Oscar Madison about the condition of his room every time I looked at my Oscar tank. I tried to keep it looking nice. It was a 55 gallon in the livingroom, and my mother's patience was running out.

It started out as a 20 Long when I first got those cute little Oscars. Back then, it wasn't even an Oscar tank — it was a community tank. One by one the other occupants of the tank disappeared. I'd search the floor for the dried remains of a jumper, but none were found. All the while the Oscars grew. They grew into a 30. I put the 20 Long under the 30, along with the few community fish that were left. In the 30, the Oscars grew some more.

I begged and pleaded with my mother to let me get a 55. After all, the only reason the 30 was messy was because it was too small for the Oscars. A 55 would stay a lot cleaner. Besides, having a son who kept fish meant that she knew where I was and it kept me out of trouble...unlike some kids.

For my 16th birthday, mom got me the tank. I was grinning from ear to ear. That Friday, I went to the pet shop and bought a Supreme filter, and picked out just the right plastic plants to make this tank a work of art. I cleaned the tank and let it air dry overnight.

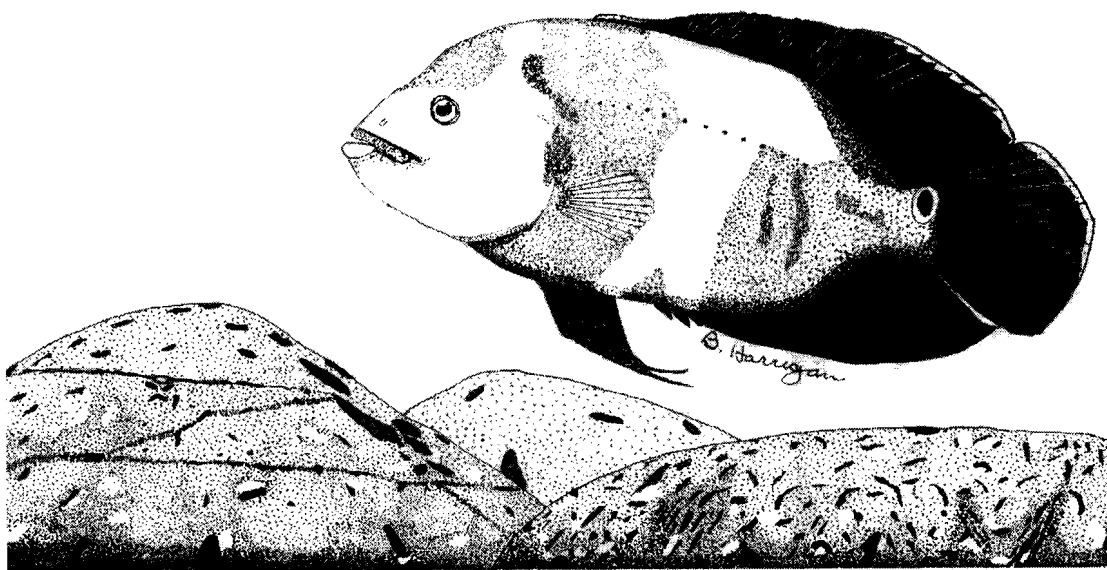
Saturday I put the undergravel plate in place, carefully laid the gravel on top of it, filled the tank three quarters of the way up, and landscaped it with the plastic plants and some red

slate rock. (I was so proud with how natural I thought it looked.) Then I hooked up the heater, connected a Silent Giant to the undergravel filter, took half of the water (the cleanest half I could get) from the 30, and finished filling the 55. I set up the Supreme filter, put the glass canopy and strip light on top, and let it sit overnight.

Sunday I tested the water in both the 55 and the 30. I raised the pH to 6.8 and made sure the temperature was at 78° F. I hadn't fed the Oscars that morning, so they were swimming right by the front glass, and netting them out was no problem. The only other inhabitant of the 30 gallon tank was an eight inch long *gibbiceps* catfish with a spectacular dorsal fin. (I got him from Steve Selznick. Steve was President of the Brooklyn Aquarium Society and getting into African cichlids in a big way.) All the fish seemed happy in their new tank, and the *gibbiceps* held his own with the Oscars.

The Oscars loved goldfish, snails, and earthworms. I cultured earthworms, to my mom's dismay, in a Styrofoam box under the tank stand. The Oscars also ate flakes, pellets, and freeze-dried krill. No fish I ever had ate freeze-dried krill, but these Oscars did. I even fed them Friskies, that were meant for the cat. My friends got a kick out of seeing that, but watching them wolf down goldfish was the highlight. Needless to say, the Oscars ate just about anything, and they continued to grow.

The major problem was that half the food they ate exited through their gills as a nebulous



cloud that just hung in the water. I needed to clean the Supreme filter three times a week, just to keep the water clean. If I didn't do a 25% water change twice a week, the Oscars would sulk on the bottom. They wouldn't even rush to the front glass to greet me. (When they gave me that greeting, I swear they were smiling.)

I knew I needed help keeping the tank clean, but I couldn't talk any of my friends into helping me clean up fish muck, at least not on a steady basis. My mother warned me that if I couldn't keep that tank clean, I couldn't keep it. Yikes!

Then one day I had a brilliant idea. I'd get the help I needed from nature itself. I would get assistance from those who love cleaning up fish muck, crayfish. I went to the pet shop and picked up three crayfish along with my weekly purchase of 25 goldfish. I dumped the goldfish in and let the feeding frenzy subside. Then, I plopped the crayfish in at the other end of the tank. The Oscars, being intelligent and inquisitive creatures, dashed over to where the crayfish had landed. Well, as much of a dash as they could muster with at least six goldfish in their guts. As they went in for a closer look, the crayfish raised their claws and backpeddled to the rocks. The Oscars lost interest and slurped down some more goldfish.

After a short spell of hiding in the rocks, the crayfish went about doing the job I intended them to do. The gravel looked clean and the fish muck was gone. Understand that it took them about a week to do it, but they enjoyed themselves in the process, and they grew. Now at the time I didn't know that for crayfish to grow they have to shed their shells. One morning I check out the Oscar tank and I see an empty crayfish shell. My first thought was that the Oscars sucked it right out of its shell. Scouring the tank, I found two crayfish playing housekeepers and it wasn't until I checked the cave that I saw the third one. I wanted to see if it was all right, so I got it out of hiding. At that very second, one of the Oscars pounced, extending his lips and inhaling the crayfish tail first. Two gulps, and the crayfish was smashed.

I was told afterwards not only about crayfish molting, but that when they do, they inadvertently release a chemical that some fish can detect and know the crayfish is vulnerable. (After a crayfish molts, it takes time for his new shell to harden.) Did I mention that Oscars are intelligent? By the end of the week the other two crayfish had molted, and were eaten. After that, the Oscars went after the crayfish the minute I put them in the tank, ignoring the goldfish until they got their "lobster tails."

Oscars and goldfish have a strange relationship. Every once in a while the Oscars would pick a goldfish that they wouldn't eat. It

was like they kept it as a pet. I tried to get them to eat the goldfish, otherwise it would get big and they wouldn't be able to eat it. I'd end up giving the goldfish to someone with a pond. I even went so far as not feeding the Oscars for three days, hoping that hunger would drive them to consume the goldfish. Nope. All three were swimming around like pals.

One thing the Oscars never seemed to care about was all the time and trouble I went through to aquascape their tank. I'd get home from school to find plastic plants floating and gravel burying the caves which I had cleverly created. I once used live plants, only to have the Oscars think I had installed a salad bar. It was all disheartening, but I got used to it.

Then one day my mother was waiting for me at the door. "You better do something about those two." The stern look on her face told me that she meant business. Turning the corner to see what trouble they had gotten into this time, I saw that the tank looked like a hurricane had hit it. "Oscar, Oscar, Oscar" was echoing in my mind. The filter was running dry because they had knocked the syphon out of the intake tubes. All of the plants were floating, gravel had been moved, rocks were knocked down, the *gibbiceps* was hiding timorously in the corner, and the water (which was never crystal clear) was murky. My mother informed me that she mopped up water from them twice already, and she swears they tried to splash her.

As I approached, they came to the front glass. They were not smiling. It looked more like they were scowling at me. The first thing I did was to get the filter going. They were belligerent, and making it difficult. "Mom, something is wrong with them." The displeasure on her face morphed to concern. She cared as much about these fish as I did. Even as I tried to do a water change, the Oscars attacked the gravel washer.

I stopped. I didn't want to stress these fish any more than they already were. I sat in my favorite chair to reflect on what was happening. Needless to say, my favorite chair was right next to the 55. After a few minutes, the Oscars got used to me sitting there, and swam away. As the filter cleared the water, I noticed the Oscars hovering over a rock. Taking a closer look, something about the rock didn't seem right. Then I realized, "Mom, they laid eggs." My mom rushed over with a beaming grandmotherly smile. There must have been over a thousand alabaster eggs covering that rock. "That's why they were acting that way," my mom was saying, more to herself than to me.

I called every fish friend I had, partly to ask advice, and partly to relay my achievement, like I had more to do with it than the fish had. Thanks to the club, I had all the advice I needed.

A club member even kept my *gibbiceps* for me. When the fry were free-swimming, the parents moved them to a pit they had dug in the gravel. The fry grew fast.

When they were big enough, I brought a bucket load to the pet shop. Dreams of getting rich by breeding fish escorted me to the store. I could tell the proprietor wasn't overjoyed to have this kid show up out of the blue with a school of fish. He traded me some merchandise for the Oscars.

When I got home, I told my mom of my disappointment. She looked at the tank that still had 50 of the offspring. "What are you going to do

with the rest?" I just smiled and said "If we move the chair, we can fit a 125 where the 55 is."

The Oscars were a turning point for me in the hobby. Even though I never got a 125 (not yet, anyway), they precipitated my one 20 gallon tank to blossom into four tanks — a 20, two 30s, and a 55. I got the second 30 when the Oscar fry started to grow.

Oscars are intelligent, robust, easy to breed, and my mom loved them. They will always have a special place in my heart.

