

The Names You Know, the People You Don't: *Dr. Herbert Axelrod*

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Quick, name the person from the aquarium hobby who;

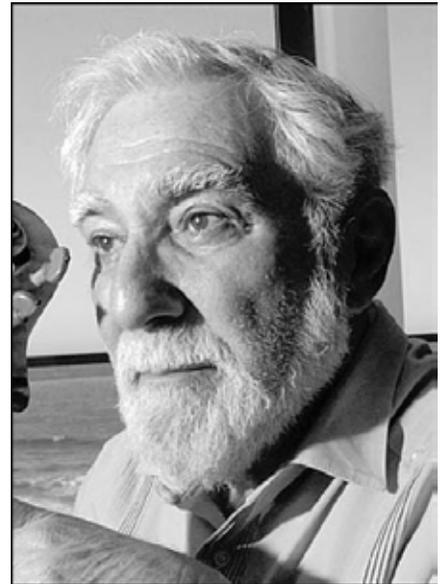
- Collected then sold thirteen Stradivarius instruments to the New Jersey Symphony Orchestra
- Started the magazine *Tropical Fish Hobbyist*
- Served in a M*A*S*H unit in the Korean War
- Reportedly spent a week discussing sea slugs with Japanese Emperor Hirohito
- Reportedly studied mathematics under Dr. Albert Einstein
- Served a prison sentence in the United States for tax evasion
- Has the Institute of Ichthyology at the University of Guelph named after him
- Has one genus and sixteen species of fish named after him
- Has two species of Rainbowfish named after him

The Beginning

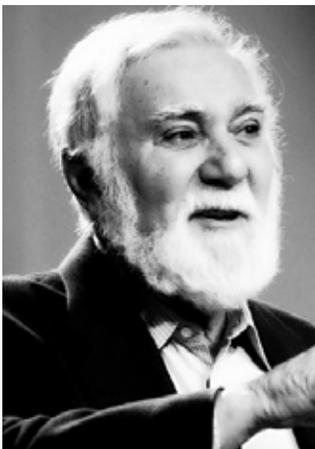
Herbert Richard Axelrod was born on June 7th, 1927 in Bayonne, New Jersey. His father, Aaron, was a mathematics and violin teacher, and his mother, Edith, worked for the United States Navy Procurement Office.

The childhood of Herbert is not well known, although certain alleged actions and events have been related over the years. One story has it that at the age of ten he swam fifteen miles across Lake Ontario. However, what is most noted about his youth is the role that music and musical instruments (especially the violin) played. Under the influence, tutelage and guidance of his father, Herbert's first developed his love for music and the violin. Reportedly, a miniature violin was placed in his crib when he was an infant, and when Herbert was in his teens his uncle, Paul Kochansky, a renowned violinist who owned the "Ole Bull", a priceless 1687 Stradivarius violin, permitted him to play it.

Herbert graduated from high school (likely Bayonne High School where his father was a teacher) on his 17th birthday and entered the United States Army's Army Specialized Training Program (ASTP) for pre-med studies. Six years later, at the age of 23, he was sent to Korea to be in charge of a M*A*S*H (Mobile Army Surgical Hospital) blood bank.



Adventures



It was while in Korea that two defining and important events in the life of Herbert Axelrod, one confirmed and the other possibly apocryphal, occurred. The first was that somehow Herbert received a wound to his hands. In order to exercise and regain his manual dexterity, he began typing. So he typed and typed and typed... and ended up typing his *Handbook of Tropical Aquarium Fishes*, which sold over a million copies and is considered one of the most influential and best selling aquarium books of all time.

The second event may or may not be true. In an article published by John T. Ward in 2003 on Dr. Axelrod, a story was told that occurred after the publication of Herbert Axelrod's first book on aquarium fish (*Handbook of Tropical Aquarium Fishes* was actually his second published book). Apparently either while on leave in Japan and/or acquiring some whiskey for his unit in Korea, he met Japanese Emperor Hirohito. It is known that Emperor Hirohito did have an avid interest in marine biology, and the story is told that while in Japan, Herbert Axelrod had a chance encounter with a Japanese ichthyologist in a Tokyo library. This resulted in Herbert being invited to the Japanese

Summer Palace. There he was introduced Emperor Hirohito and the two engaged in multiple discussions over the period of a week on various aspects of ichthyology and marine biology, specifically marine invertebrates.



Cheirodon axelrodi

In 1952 Herbert Axelrod returned from Korea and began to teach at New York University and continued his own studies as well. He eventually obtained a Masters degree in mathematics and then a PhD in medical statistics (epidemiology). During this same period when he was a student, he began to publish the *Tropical Fish Hobbyist*, a magazine which continues to this day. The company that arose around that magazine, TFH Publications, eventually became the largest publisher of animal and pet books in the world.

It was also during this period that Dr. Axelrod informs that he used to travel to Princeton to hear Dr. Albert Einstein talk about lattice theory. Again, the story is plausible as Dr. Einstein did teach at Princeton during that time, Dr. Axelrod's Masters degree was in mathematics, and New York wasn't that far away. But did he really study under Dr. Einstein? Or perhaps just meet him? Unfortunately there is no confirmation of the story, but it certainly adds even more spice to an eventful life.

It was the success of *Tropical Fish Hobbyist* and TFH Publications that enabled Dr. Axelrod to pursue his various interests. One area was... well, adventure. There is a story that Dr. Axelrod and another man traveled to Brazil with the goal of capturing two rare black jaguars to be used in a film by Walt Disney. Given that the movie was likely Walt Disney's "Jungle Cat" (released in 1959) this was likely around 1957 or 1958. They were reportedly able to capture one true black jaguar, but were unable to find a second. To fulfill the assignment, they apparently captured a regular jaguar, tranquilized it, and had a hairdresser dye it black.

The other area of interest that his financial success enabled him to indulge was that of rare musical string instruments, specifically Stradivarius violins. By 1975 the money that he had earned from TFH Publications allowed him to purchase the Stradivarius violin named "Empress Catherine" from a Philadelphia dealer. From then until 1995 he bought, sold and traded various rare instruments

Philanthropy - Stradivarius and the Axelrod Institute of Ichthyology

We're a fish club, not an orchestral appreciation society, so all the specific details would be lost on most of us. The high points are that in 1998 he donated two violins, a viola and a cello – all inlaid Stradivarius – as well as several other musical instruments to the Smithsonian Institution. The value of the four Stradivarius was estimated to be \$50 million dollars. In 2003 he sold 30 other instruments (this collection dated from the 17th and 18th centuries, is now known as "The Golden Age Collection" and contained 13 more Stradivarius) to the New Jersey Symphony Orchestra for \$18 million.

However, as a fish club, we should also be aware of a somewhat local connection that we have with Dr. Axelrod. In December 1989 Dr. Axelrod donated a fossil collection



constituted mainly of fish fossils to the University of Guelph. The fossil donation is reported to be one of the largest gifts ever made to a Canadian university. Six months later, in June 1990, the Axelrod Institute of Ichthyology was established at the University of Guelph. The Axelrod Institute serves an educational function in both studying various aspects of fish and aquaculture as well as displays and educational presentations of both living and fossil fish to the public.

Legal Quandaries

In 1997 Dr. Axelrod sold TFH Publications to the Central Garden & Pet Company of California for \$70 million. As is usual in transactions of such a large nature, there were various agreements as part of the contract. One of these was that if TFH Publications reached certain earning targets after the sale of the company, Dr. Axelrod would receive further compensation. Dr. Axelrod alleged that Central Garden & Pet Company suppressed earnings to avoid paying Dr. Axelrod that compensation. Central Garden & Pet Company filed a countersuit alleging that the value of TFH Publications had been artificially inflated prior to their purchase of it. The two suits resolved with the court finding that Dr. Axelrod was due further compensation from Central Garden & Pet Company in the amount of

\$3.7 million, but also found that the value of TFH Publications had been inflated, and the court ordered Dr. Axelrod to pay Central Garden & Pet Company \$20.1 million.

But the payment of millions of dollars to Central Garden & Pet Company is only a part of Dr. Axelrod's legal woes. Questions began to surface regarding the provenance of the instruments he had donated to both the Smithsonian Institution and to the New Jersey Symphony Orchestra. It was found that while the instruments were all old and therefore valuable, they were not necessarily the specific instruments that he had represented them as, and therefore they were not as valuable as he had presented them to be. It was alleged that they had been assigned a higher value so as to increase the tax write-offs that Dr. Axelrod could claim as part of the donation.



Melanotaenia herbertaxelrodi

In addition, investigations had also revealed that Dr. Axelrod had been funneling millions of dollars into Swiss bank accounts. Most people would argue that you have the right to place your money where you want, but unfortunately Dr. Axelrod wasn't paying taxes on that money. On April 23rd, 2004, Dr. Axelrod was indicted at the federal court in New Jersey. He then failed to appear on April 21st. It turns out that he had fled to Cuba, then traveled to Switzerland, and finally to Germany where he was arrested on June 15th, 2004. Following his arrest he was extradited back to the United States where, on March 21st, 2005, he was sentenced to 18 months in prison for tax fraud. He was released in October 2005 (with credit given for time served) and left the United States to settle in Switzerland after posting a \$50 million dollar bond to cover possible civil damages in the Smithsonian Institute / New Jersey Symphony Orchestra matters.

Criticisms

There is no doubt that when a person attains the personal wealth that Dr. Axelrod his, there will be those who, justifiably or not, challenge or criticize that person. This is certainly true of Dr. Axelrod.



Chilatherina axelrodi

As of 1965 Dr. Axelrod had been sued 14 times. He countersued in 13 of the instances and won every case. In the one he lost, in 1955, he was found guilty of reproducing illustrations from an earlier work by Dr. William T. Innes. However, as Dr. Innes was unable to establish that he had lost money due to Dr. Axelrod's use of the photos, no damages were awarded.

Regarding his negotiations with the New Jersey Symphony Orchestra, and commenting on a book he had published about the Golden Collection and the instruments valuations, Stefan Hersh, a dealer of musical instruments and a Professor of Music at Roosevelt University in Chicago, commented that "Axelrod is a typical vanity collector who doesn't know much about instruments."

In relation to his endeavours within the aquarium fish hobby there have been many who have criticized him. Alan Fletcher, a former professor at Cornell University once stated that “*Herb is not a qualified ichthyologist, his PhD is in biometrics. Although he is an expert on tropical aquarium fish, he has only written popular literature, never scientific papers. Scientists won’t criticize him because he offered them opportunities to publish new work. In return, he managed to get many fish named after him.*” In an interview by Juan Miguel Azas published on the Cichlid Room Companion website in 2010, Heiko Bleher relates a story that in 1984 Dr. Axelrod stole his idea for a book of aquarium fish then known in the aquarium hobby. Mr. Bleher informs that he told Dr. Axelrod of his idea and a year later was surprised when Dr. Axelrod published his *Atlas of Freshwater Aquarium Fishes*. In another article, Ross Socolof – October 23, 1925 – October 20, 2009, published on Aquapress Bleher, Mr. Bleher’s website, there are more mentions of how Dr. Axelrod cheated both Heiko Bleher and Ross Socolof.

Finally there is the story surrounding the Cardinal Tetra, *Paracheirodon axelrodi*. In 1952 this fish was discovered by Dr. Harold Sioli in a tributary of the Rio Negro in Brazil. Dr. George S. Myers and Stanley Weitzman studied the fish and prepared an article for the *University of Stanford Ichthyological Bulletin* proposing to name the fish *Hyphessobrycon cardinalis*. During the same time frame a shipment of these fish were sent to New York for sale. It is alleged that Dr. Axelrod saw these fish in a local fish store, purchased and then provided some to L.P. Schultz. Mr. Schultz in turn prepared and published an article in *Tropical Fish Hobbyist* naming the fish *Cheirodon axelrodi* in honour of Dr. Axelrod. The article was published on February 21st, 1956 in *Tropical Fish Hobbyist*. The article in the *University of Stanford Ichthyological Bulletin* was published on February 21st, 1956. Under the rules of the International Code of Zoological Nomenclature (ICZN), priority goes to the first published name. Therefore, since the article in *Tropical Fish Hobbyist* was published one day before the article in the *University of Stanford Ichthyological Bulletin*, the name stood as *Cheirodon axelrodi*. (In 1960 Dr. Jacques Grey erected the genus *Paracheirodon* and *Cheirodon axelrodi* became *Paracheirodon axelrodi*.)

However, it has been alleged (but never proven) that Dr. Axelrod moved the publication date of that particular issue of *Tropical Fish Hobbyist* back a few days so that the name presented therein took precedence.

Lasting Legacy



Cynotilapia axelrodi

As you can see, there are certainly several instances where the actions of Dr. Axelrod appear to be quite questionable. Did he “steal” the name of the Cardinal Tetra? Perhaps. Was he guilty of dishonest dealings with the sale of TFH Publications, the sale of Stradivarius to the New Jersey Symphony Orchestra and the donation of Stradivarius to the Smithsonian Institution? It was deemed to be so by a court of law. Was he guilty of tax evasion? Again, he was found guilty of those charges.

Did he swim 10 miles across Lake Ontario? Who knows? Did he study under Albert Einstein? Did he meet and speak with Emperor Hirohito about marine invertebrates? Did he hunt jaguars in Brazil for use in a Walt Disney film? Again, all are stories told and may or may not have happened.

What we do know is that he started *Tropical Fish Hobbyist*, and then developed it into the most influential pet related publishing company in the world. While he may have overvalued Stradivarius and other musical instruments, he did sell or donate them to institutions where they could be used. He did donate fossils to the University of Guelph.

Dr. Herbert Axelrod has left a lasting impression on the aquarium hobby. For all the misdeeds he may have committed, he also furthered the hobby we all are so involved in, and by doing so, furthered us as aquarists.

Selected publications written by Dr. Herbert Axelrod

- *Handbook of Tropical Aquarium Fishes*
- *Saltwater Aquarium Fishes*
- *Swordtails and Platies*
- *African Cichlids of Lakes Malawi and Tang*
- *Aquarium Fishes of the World*
- *Dr. Axelrod's Atlas of Freshwater Aquarium Fishes*

Fish Named in Honor of Dr. Axelrod

One genus of fish, *Axelrodia* (4 species) and sixteen species of fish have been named in honor of Dr. Herbert Axelrod. The species of fish are;

- *Brittanichthys axelrodi* (Blood Red Tetra)
- *Chilatherina axelrodi* (Axelrod's Rainbowfish)
- *Corydoras axelrodi* (Pink Corydoras)
- *Cynotilapia axelrodi*
- *Ecsenius axelrodi* (Axelrod's clown blenny [Marine])
- *Hyphessobrycon axelrodi* (Calypso Tetra)
- *Neolebias axelrodi* (Niger River Tetra)
- *Paracheirodon axelrodi* (Cardinal Tetra)
- *Parananchromis axelrodi*
- *Pseudogramma axelrodi* (Axelrod's Reef Bass [Marine])
- *Schultzites axelrodi* (Axelrod's Moenkhausia)
- *Sternarchorhynchus axelrodi* (Axelrod's Tube-Snouted Ghost Knifefish)
- *Sundadanio axelrodi* (Axelrod's Rasbora)
- *Varicorhinus axelrodi*
- *Hyphessobrycon herbertaxelrodi* (Black Neon Tetra)
- *Melanotaenia herbertaxelrodi* (Lake Tebera Rainbowfish)
- *Melanotaenia herbertaxelrodi* (Yellow Rainbowfish / Lake Tebera Rainbowfish)

