



Drawing by Dean Norton.

# THE HISTORY OF FANCY RATS

## In The Beginning

When humans ceased to be hunter gatherers and instead became farmers, their lives and those of rats became intimately connected. Humans learned to grow and store grain, and rats learned it was easier to feed off these stores than to fend for themselves. They also discovered that human dwellings provided excellent shelter from the elements. Thus began the relationship between humans and rats. While this relationship was of necessity not an amiable one, it was inevitable that someone would eventually catch and keep a rat. This first "pet" rat was most likely a normal wild-colored Agouti; however, color mutations are rather common. Unusually colored individuals occur with some frequency in the wild and often when these animals were discovered, they were caught and kept as interesting oddities.

The Brown or Norway rat, *Rattus norvegicus*, is the species which was domesticated into what we recognize as Fancy or pet rats. This animal began steadily colonizing Europe, and particularly England, in the early 18th century. Upon its arrival, the Brown rat was quick to drive out the indigenous Black rats. Because it was larger and more adaptable, the Brown rat was able to thrive in environments that were not suitable for the Black rats. Thus England was somewhat overrun with rats.

## Rat Pits

This excess in the rodent population led to a rather unusual sport. In Victorian England, great numbers of wild rats were captured for use in rat pits. This pastime was particularly popular in London and involved placing a large number of rats in an enclosure with a dog. The dog would then proceed to dispatch as many rats as possible, and the one who killed the largest number in the shortest time

was declared the winner. Bets were placed on the dogs and large sums of money exchanged hands at these establishments.

Natural mutations being so common, it was invariable that some unusually colored specimens would pass through these places. At least one rat pit owner kept and bred some of these oddities. Jimmy Shaw managed one of the largest sporting public houses in London and he was reported to have kept and bred strangely colored animals when he found them. It can be assumed that he then sold these rats as pets.

## Jack Black, Rat Catcher

With so many wild rats in England it was necessary to find some form of control. This led to a new career for some people, that of rat catcher. One of these men, the Royal Rat Catcher Jack Black, can be credited as the originator of the first true domestic rats. In the course of his work, when he came upon strangely colored animals, he kept and bred them. Eventually he had Albino, Black, Fawn, Grey, and Marked animals which he bred and sold as pets. Between the 1840s and 1860s Jimmy Shaw and Jack Black sold many animals and provided the background from which our present day domestic rats originate.

## The First Fancy

In the early 1800s colored mice began to find their way into Europe and became popular, particularly in the U.K. In 1895 the National Mouse Club was founded in England. They set standards for the different varieties and held shows. It was because of this organization that the rat fancy was born.

In 1901 Miss Mary Douglas, the "mother of the rat fancy," wrote to the N.M.C. and asked whether they would consider opening their doors to rats. The N.M.C. agreed,

and the first classes for Fancy Rats were staged in the fall of 1901. By 1912 there was enough interest in rats that the club's name was officially changed to the National Mouse and Rat Club.

It was during this time that Mendel's theories on genetics were rediscovered by the scientific community. Fancy mice proved to be excellent models to use for further research. Rats were not used much for studying genetics; however, being small, easy to house, inexpensive to maintain, and quick to reproduce, they became favorites for other types of research.

Unfortunately, the popularity of fancy rats began to decline after the death of Miss Douglas in 1921. Less and less interest in rats was shown over the next few years and in 1929 the club was reorganized dropping the word rat from its name. The National Mouse Club is still in existence today.

## The N.F.R.S. Is Born

Over the next 45 years interest in fancy rats was very sporadic. Several times there were people interested in starting rat clubs; however, there was never enough support to really have a go at it. 1976 was the turning point. In January of that year the National Fancy Rat Society was founded. This was the first ever "rats only" organization. It set standards, published a newsletter, and held shows. Since 1976 interest in fancy rats has grown enormously, and many new varieties have been found and standardized.

The history of domestic rats in the United States is not very clear. Most likely people did catch and keep wild rats as pets, and unusually colored ones probably were found. Unfortunately there are no written records (that we are aware of) documenting this. Scientific laboratories are responsible for most of the fancy rats found in the U.S. Early pet care books dating

from the 1920s suggest contacting a local laboratory or university to obtain a pet white rat. If this was not successful, they recommend asking a pet shop keeper to contact their animal supplier and see if they could provide one. Apparently many people who bred animals for pet shops also supplied them to laboratories.

## The U.S. Rat Fancy

The rat fancy is relatively young in the United States. The first U.S. club dealing with both rats and mice, the Mouse and Rat Breeders Association, appeared in 1978. In 1983 the American Fancy Rat and Mouse Association originated. Since that time rats have been imported from England so that the U.S. now has all the varieties available overseas. Fanciers in the U.S. have also been responsible for originating a number of their own varieties. There are now other clubs in the United States, and many more worldwide catering to rats (and mice).

Over the last 20 years there has been a large increase of interest in Fancy Rats as show animals and pets. In a large part we have the recent popularity of reptile keeping to thank for this, as many people buy rodents to feed their reptiles and end up discovering what wonderful pets rats make. Also, people have less time, money, and space for animals so are often turning to Pocket Pets as an ideal alternative. Rats today are more popular than they have ever been, and we can look forward to this trend continuing into the future.

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If you would like additional information or have further questions, contact the Association.

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