

Brant Lake's Most Famous Rodent

Colleen Murtagh, Town Historian

Did you ever wonder where the gerbils that were begged for by our children came from? Many people will be surprised to find out that the first gerbils sold in this country came from 11 breeding pairs imported to this country in 1954 by Victor Schwentker at Tumblebrook Farm, the present site of Garwood Boats. These rodents were captured and bred along the Amur River Basin in Eastern Mongolia, and after their arrival in Brant Lake, soon became a favorite childhood pet.

Victor Schwentker was born in Schenectady, studied Agriculture at Mississippi A&M and then studied genetics at the University of Iowa. After WWI he worked for GE in Philadelphia where, in 1929, he met and married Mildred West, a Brant Lake native with a master's degree in Education. With the crash of the stock market, Mildred and Victor returned to the West Farm, Mildred's family's home for over 100 years, nestled at the foot of Brant Lake. The farm was no longer a working farm and Victor saw an opportunity when he discovered that biology labs were looking for experimental animals. He began raising guinea pigs, hamsters, mice, moles, rabbits, rats, voles, and even a few monkeys. He used his background in genetics but adopted a great deal of "on the job training" to develop animals that could be used in testing labs throughout the Northeast. His business developed exponentially during WWII when the Pacific front opened, and U.S. troops were exposed to malaria and yellow fever.

Visiting with Patricia Schwentker Greenwald at her family home several years ago, she told me that Tumblebrook farm was considered a Navy installation with guards making sure that the animals were safe from Axis Powers. She explained that all the feeding dishes, cages and shipping crates were designed and manufactured on site at Tumblebrook. Trailers of shavings from Murphy's Lumber Mill in Wevertown would be brought in to use as litter, as Schwentker insisted on immaculate conditions within his labs. All the photography was done by her father and used in the advertising brochures that he wrote and produced.

Many local men worked at Tumblebrook, reporting that Victory Schwentker was a kind and caring boss. At one point, during the height of the war, 40 local men

were employed at Tumblebrook, the second greatest number only to the tanneries in their hay-day. Tumblebrook farm was the leading supplier of lab animals during WWII in the world. Animals were driven to Riparius daily, and loaded on train cars, where they would be shipped to labs.

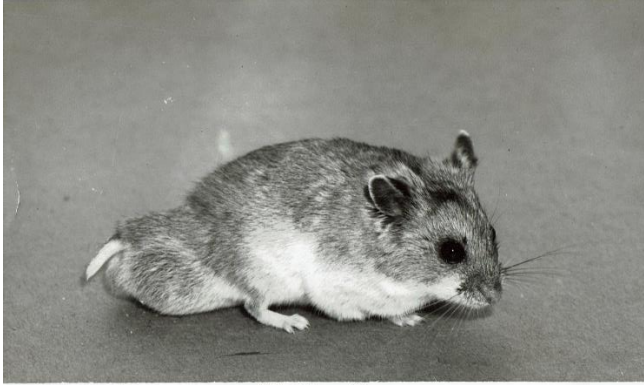
Before the end of the war, plans were being made to have a landing strip constructed at the top of Duell Hill, but when the atomic bombs were dropped the need for laboratory animals decreased drastically.

At the end of the war, Schwentker needed to rebrand himself. During the Korean conflict, Mr. Schwentker became a consultant and operated animal breeding for the U.S. Army Biological Corps.

While still producing and supplying lab animals for biological testing, he found the Mongolian Gerbils and imported them. He discovered that they were friendly, liked to be handled and were well suited as pets for children. These were sold through school supply companies and became classroom pets.

Many small blurbs can be found reporting on talks that Mr. Schwentker gave to Rotary, schools and other local groups. He was said to enjoy hosting local school groups, something attended by Horicon Central students through 1965.

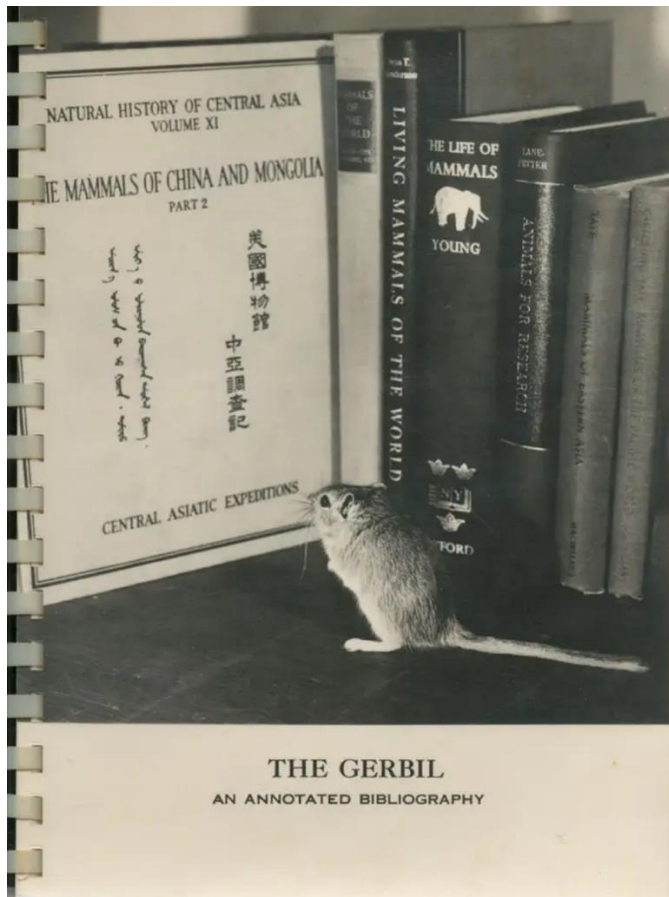
In the 1960's the stock and equipment were sold to Donald Robinson in Massachusetts, whose daughter wrote a memoir of her father's life in *The Gerbil Farmer's Daughter*, although Patricia Greenwald certainly was deserving of this title.



Male Chinese Hamster
actual size

TUMBLEBROOK





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