

The Early History of the Ameraucana Breed and Club

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It is very difficult to describe the history of the “AMERAUCANA” breed to everyone’s satisfaction. Some would say that it is “America’s NEWEST breed”, emphasizing its most recent developments; but that description overlooks and would deny the long history of the bearded muffed tailed blue egg layers that existed long before adoption of the ABA and APA Standards for “AMERAUCANAS”, when such birds were being raised and shown as one type of “ARAUCANA”, going back to imports from southern Chile in the 1930’s. But in spite of its long history, it is correct and accurate to say that the “AMERAUCANA” is “America’s most newly recognized APA/ABA Standard Breed.”



As you may know, a breed is NOT a BREED until the APA or ABA say it’s a “BREED”. For those who may not know the breed characteristics, “Ameraucanas” are first and foremost BLUE EGG layers. They MUST have “pea combs”, and be bearded and muffed and tailed, and CANNOT have any tufts. They also MUST have slate blue legs, and red ear lobes (females pale). There has been a definite relationship established between the “Pea Comb” gene and the “Blue Egg” gene. Both these genes have been shown to be carried on the same chromosome, and thus closely related.

No history of the “Ameraucana” could be complete without understanding some of the history of the “Araucana” breed. But one should first understand that the “Araucana” as we know it, was never a “pure” breed, even in Chile.

To generalize the situation as briefly as possible; going back prior to the arrival of the Spaniards, the Mapuche Indians in Chile had TWO breeds of chickens raised in different areas of the country: One they called the “Collonca”, which was small, laid BLUE eggs, was rumpless, and had a small single comb; the other they called the “Quetro” or “Quetero”, derived from their word “kerto” meaning stammering, referring to its peculiar crow. The “Quetro” was TUFTED, had a flowing tail, pea comb, and laid brown eggs --- “Tufted rumpless” occurred when a rumpless bird crossed with a tufted tailed bird, but these offspring were rare. The latter were later called “Collonca de Arêtes” by the Spanish, meaning “Collonca with Earrings”. These “Collonca de Arêtes” were blue egg layers, since the blue egg gene is dominant.

In 1556, the Mapuche Indians were attacked again by the Spanish, and an epic poem named “La Araucana”, was written by Alonso de Ercilla about their bravery. This name later stuck with the Indians, and subsequently with their chickens. The name derives from the Gulf of Arauco, near Concepcion, Chile.

Dr. Rueben Bustos, a chicken expert in Chile, had himself developed a strain of the so-called “Collonca de Arêtes”, and wrote about the Araucanas in his country, in 1914. But these breeds remained quite unknown to the world until Professor Salvador Castello, a Spanish poultry expert, who had observed and photographed some “Collonca de Arêtes” at an exhibition in Santiago, Chile, in 1914, later reported on these birds in 1921 in a paper to the First World’s Poultry Congress in the Hague, Holland, causing a flurry of excitement throughout the poultry world. Prof. Castello did not realize at that time that the “breed” that he had seen and described was NOT native fowl, as he had been told by Dr. Bustos, but rather were the product of Dr. Bustos’ many years of selective breeding. Professor Castello later corrected himself in 1924 – but by then the wave of interest in these birds had already begun, and many erroneous ideas had already developed, based upon the original 1921 paper, which was erroneous. [Many of these erroneous ideas are still in circulation today.]

Many persons since then have devoted an enormous amount of time investigating the origin of these Pre-Colombian chickens and the blue egg gene. Their papers are available and are VERY interesting. They generally illustrate that many of the characteristics of these chickens are apparently of ASIAN (Trans-Pacific) origin, since there were no inherently native chickens in South America before the arrival of the Spanish and Portuguese, which means that there was some means of long Trans-Pacific voyages before the Spanish arrived.

The first description of the Araucana to be published in this country was done by John Robinson in the Reliable Poultry Journal of 1923, with photos showing tufted rumpless birds. Later, in 1925, Mr. Keller of the Pratt Experimental Farm in Pennsylvania wrote about his small flock – the first Araucanas imported to the USA. The earliest imports were mostly of selected rumpless and tufted varieties. Later imports were made up of “Araucanas” of all types, among which were bearded muffed tailed varieties, all of which then were bred here in the USA. All of these were at that time labeled “Araucanas”.

Of special importance to the Ameraucana history is that a shipwreck of a Chilean freighter many decades ago, in the Western Isles of Scotland, established there a type of blue egg layer from Chile, which were tailed, bearded and muffed, and these birds became the forbearer for the birds now recognized as the Standard “ARAUCANA” in Britain and Australia. These vary only little from our present “AMERAUCANA” Standard. Some of these birds at times reportedly produce tufts, and also rumplessness, showing the possibility of the presence of regressive traits with some of these genes.

Responding to a general “Araucana fever”, due to their promotions for “Easter Egg” chickens, and false and wildly exaggerated claims about the extra healthfulness of Araucana eggs, commercial hatcheries expanded a frantic effort to outcross blue egg laying “Araucanas” with everything else, and sell them as “Araucanas”, when they were nothing more than mongrels (which sales are still continuing today). However, there were a number of dedicated breeders who attempted to keep what they each viewed as the “original Araucana” from becoming extinct, and various groups formed, but each had their own idea of what a “Standard Araucana” should be.

Among them were bearded muffed tailed types, but these were far from being standardized. Prior to 1976, there were breeders specializing and developing BOTH the tufted rumpless type of “Araucana” and the bearded muffed and tailed type (and everything in between), but efforts were made by a few dedicated breeders to standardize their own preferred varieties of “Araucanas”, and each sought adoption of their OWN version of a Standard for an “Araucana” breed. This proved to be VERY contentious, and set the stage for much misunderstanding and ill-feelings, which unfortunately is continuing today in some areas.

Leading up to that recent period, bearded muffed and tailed blue egg layers were being advertised in the Poultry Press some thirty-eight years ago, as “Araucanas”, and being shown and awarded as “Araucanas”. Ameraucana Bantam Club (ABC) Charter Member Harry Cook, of New Jersey, had been working with what later came to be “Ameraucanas: since prior to 1960, and Harry generated letters between the ABC and Clarence Begler who bred bearded and muffed “Araucanas” even prior to that, more than 44 years ago. Mike Gilbert also had written, “Back when I was experimenting with various Araucana stocks, birds were produced with BOTH tufts and muffs, but the lethal factor associated with the ear tufts resulted in their selective elimination...” Regardless of other characteristics, the Araucana and the Ameraucana are BOTH distinguished from other poultry by being layers of BLUE EGGS, unique among chickens, and sought after primarily for that reason.

Responding to such breeding efforts with the “Araucana”, and the very widespread contention, and in order to attempt to define just what was an “Araucana” (as it was being developed in this country), the APA in 1974, under the direction of Pres. John Freeman, entered the fray. For the 1975 APA Convention in Pomona, CA, the Araucana breeders were invited to present their case, and a “Qualifying Meet” was set up. They were represented by a group called “Action for Araucanas”, and this group presented FOUR different proposed Standards to the APA, but NOT ONE could be accepted because NONE of the “Standards” conformed to even ONE of the types present there to be

“qualified”, which birds also were ALL DIFFERENT. The Judges then followed the only guide they had, Mr. Robinson’s 1924 description. The APA Standards Revision Committee was then directed to proceed to develop a Standard for “Araucanas”.

Two years later in 1976, the APA accepted the description recommended by the Standard Revision Committee, which required “ARAUCANAS” to be tufted and rumpless, similar to Dr. Bustos’ developed strain of “Collonca de Arêtes”, thereafter formally DISQUALIFYING all birds formerly shown as “Araucanas” which were bearded, muffed, and tailed. This action was not greeted with universal acclaim and was denounced by those breeders who had favored the bearded muffed tailed types. Even after adoption of that Standard, the “American Araucana Breeder’s Association” was still attempting in 1977 to get acceptance of an APA Standard that would include BOTH tufted and bearded, rumpless and tailed. But that organization soon folded, without success.

As should be clear by now, all the arguments about what was the “original” Araucana were just so much nonsense and misunderstanding, and continues much so today, as there never was any such “pure” breed. The new “Araucana Standard” clearly was adopted as a “GOAL” to be achieved in future breeding; as no such proven “type” had yet been “qualified”.

After the adoption of the APA “Araucana” Standard in 1976, those breeders who had been carefully breeding and improving the bearded muffed types of “Araucanas”, were out in the cold, ruled “out” for exhibit as no longer “Araucanas”. Nevertheless those bearded types were continuing to be shown, as “Araucanas” – sometimes as “American Araucanas”.

Events leading to the development of the “AMERAUCANA” Standard, and the Ameraucana Bantam Club had commenced well prior to that 1976 action when the late Jack Bulette, an ABA Director, suggested to Don Cable of Orangevale, California, a suburb of Sacramento, that he do something about that mixed up state of the “Araucana” breed. Don was at that time a seventh-grade science teacher in Orangevale, a baseball coach and manager, a breeder and exhibitor of various breeds of poultry, including pigeons and cage birds, and a member of various poultry clubs.

Don saw that development of the tufted rumpless type of “Araucana” was proceeding well in the hands of several individuals, including our mutual friend, Ralph Strane (now Secretary of the Araucana Club of America). Ralph had succeeded in developing a strain of white tufted rumpless large fowl Araucana that were (and ARE) outstanding, and Don Cable then turned his attention to those bearded muffed tailed blue egg layer bantams, also being shown then as “Araucanas”.

Don got a trio of bearded tailed bantams from a nearby large flock of “Araucanas”, and began a program to try to achieve a measure of standardization from those bearded blue egg layers. Don struggled hard to achieve the desired shank and plumage color with limited success, and passed several years with great frustration, when in 1977 he happened to see a photo in the Poultry Press of Mike Gilbert, then living in Iowa, holding a wheaten bantam pullet with the characteristics that Don had been seeking.

Mike had shown the bird as an “American Araucana” at the Eastern Iowa Poultry Association Show of which group he was President in 1978. Mike had been “tinkering” with some bearded blue egg layer bantams in multi-colors, that he had originally obtained from Marti Hatcheries in Missouri, and had bred them up to standard varieties, but especially fell in love with the “wheatens” (shown in Poultry Press). Somehow, Don got his number and called him and asked about Mike’s stock. Don sent for a trio, and Mike sent him two pair. Don says, “I was so delighted with the birds that I began hatching, though late in the season, and was delighted again to find that they bred true to color.”

Thereafter, Don and Mike began exchanging letters in which they discussed forming a club for the purpose of seeking ABA recognition of this “new breed”. Don offered to serve as interim Secretary/Treasurer, if Mike would serve as interim President of the proposed Club, to gather interested breeders together, and hold an election. Mike

was aware of several potential club members, and together with Jerry Segler, of Illinois, and Don Cable, they scoured the membership lists of "Araucana" clubs that they had belonged to, all of which had folded!

In the meantime, Mike moved with his family from Iowa to rural Holmen, in western Wisconsin, to live on some 40 acres, mostly woodland, which gave him loads of room – 22 miles north of LaCrosse to which he commuted daily to his accounting business, until 1982 when he became a fulltime farmer until 1986 (Mike currently works for the Farm Credit System). Mike sent out the first copy of the newsletter to prospective members, but insists that "It was really Don's persistence that got us off the ground." UPS and the Postal Service were really kept in business during that time by the correspondence going back and forth between California and Wisconsin!!

The club was formed in the summer of 1978 (so far without a name), with eleven Charter members, from all points of the country – few, if any, of which knew each other personally – and even Dorian Roxburgh, Secretary of the British Araucana Club. Included among these original members was the late Frank L. Gary, Chairman of the ABA Standard Revision Committee. All these members had been working independently of each other on the improvement of the bearded type, but now came together in a common cause – ABA recognition of their bearded muffed tailed type blue egg layer. The situation in 1978 was a mixed bag at best. Commercial hatcheries had continued selling anything that laid an egg other than white as "Araucanas" or "Easter Egg" chickens – and were making outrageous claims about the superiority of the "Araucana" eggs for higher protein and lower cholesterol, which were totally FALSE.

With the "Araucana fever" that had developed, everyone wanted to try their hand at this new promotion. But two former "Araucana" clubs had recently folded due to internal squabbles, and one had been carrying on a running public feud with the leadership of the APA in both newsletters and through the Poultry Press. This atmosphere caused many a serious breeder to bristle at the mention of the "Araucana", but the new Club began to organize in the middle of this somewhat hostile environment.

From the beginning, the new Club operated on a democratic basis – by majority vote – and decided to propose at first only the colors wheaten and white. Some breeders in Oregon quit when the Club refused to accept mixed colors; the other members feeling that would be counter-productive. The question of breed name, weights, shank color, etc. were all put to a VOTE, and those points that gained the majority of votes were compiled by Mike Gilbert into a proposed Standard. There was some support for the name "American Araucana", but the name "Ameraucana" won out.

A proposed Standard was developed in early 1979, and put to a vote. Mike commented on the results of the vote as follows: "Thanks to each of you who have participated in making our voting process a success ... We have decided on slate colored shanks by an overwhelming margin. We have voted for red earlobes by a nearly two to one margin, we have decided on the weight category calling for 30 oz. mature cockbirds, and we have chosen the name "AMERAUCANA" by a margin of nearly two to one."

The first election of officers took place soon thereafter, in the fall of 1979, with Don and Mike being elected to the offices that they had held on an interim basis. The Club then had some 28 members, from eleven states, and two foreign countries, and was growing! Now all were breeding for uniformity and conformance, all to the proposed "Standard".

Although there had been resistance and hostility by some Club members in Oregon, after they dropped out the organization proceeded smoothly on track. But there was continued great hostility from outside the Club, and a regular campaign was conducted by letters in the Poultry Press accusing the Club of all kinds of skull-duggery – of trying to undermine the fancy, and make a huge profit by selling stock to unsuspecting newcomers to the fancy.

The correspondence became so heated, that the Poultry Press refused to print any more letters on the subject until things cooled down. In particular, Don Cable took a great deal of personal abuse from the opposition, persons aligned for their own special reasons against the bearded muffed tailed type of blue egg layers. By 1979, there were

enough wheaten bantam "Ameraucanas" in California to hold an ABA "qualifying meet" for breed recognition. (Don Cable had continued with his breeding program, and had shared his stock, now happy with the results.)

In November 1979, an ABA Qualifying Meet was held with the Golden Gate Club in Pleasanton, California. ABA Judge Bill Holland of Idaho (later to become President of the APA) judged the meet, and reported among other things that, "The birds were of consistent color and type." Bill Holland, along with Jack Bulette, the ABA Director, strongly recommended acceptance of the "Ameraucana" breed as a Standard. The following May 1980, The Board of Directors of the ABA voted unanimously to accept the "Ameraucana" bantam.

The proposed Standard written by Mike Gilbert, based on the members' voting, and with editing assistance from Don Cable and others, was accepted by the ABA, without change. Afterward, Mike wrote, "Our birds now can be shown for the first time without fear of disqualification as a non-standard type or breed. We all owe Don Cable a debt of gratitude for the tremendous amount of energy, dedication, and work which he has selflessly given to our cause."

Along with the summer 1980 newsletter, copies of the Club Constitution, as ratified by the Board of Directors, were distributed to all members, and the Club took on a formal existence. The fifth edition of the ABA Bantam Standard in 1981 carried the complete Standard for the "Ameraucana" bantam, including the variety descriptions for wheaten and white. In 1980, "Ameraucanas" were entered under that name officially in various meets, as reported for the Oct. 4-5, 1980 Show in Viroqua, WI, in which Mike Gilbert, Bernard Kellogg and Jerry Segler were the "Ameraucana" winners.

The first ABC NATIONAL MEET was held November 28-30, 1980 in Bluegrass, Iowa, sponsored by the Eastern Iowa Poultry Association, with Jerry Segler and Ron Klemmedson winning all. (Mike Gilbert was suddenly unable to attend). Jerry's whites had been outstanding.

The "Ameraucana Bantam Club" continued to grow and by 1982, when the Club handbook was published, it listed 36 members from all areas of the country, but somewhat concentrated in Wisconsin and California. Included as a member, was Bill Holland, later President of the APA. Also in 1982, Jeannette Frank, later to become our President, Secretary/Treasurer and Editor, joined the ABC, with Don Cable noting, "Jeannette received her start in Ameraucanas from Jack Fugate of Tennessee, and she has wheaten. She is our first member from the State of Montana, and the third from the Rocky Mountain States." John Blehm, from Birch Run, Michigan, had also joined by that time. The Breeders' Directory listed 20 active BREEDERS.

The 2nd ABC NATIONAL MEET was held on January 30-31, 1982 in Santa Rosa, CA at the Pacific Poultry Breeders Association "California National". Twenty Ameraucanas were shown by three members, all in wheaten bantams, and Don Cable carried the day. Five members were present. In the summer of 1982, the Poultry Press carried an article written by Cathy Brunson, President of the Araucana Club of America, in which she called for more cooperation and mutual understanding among ALL breeders of blue egg fowl. Don Cable wrote her a congratulatory letter, and received a warm reply.

Don Cable and the Ameraucanas had taken quite a lot of brickbats in the poultry journals over the years as mentioned previously – Jeannette Frank once wrote that she had been told by an APA/ABA judge that "he would NEVER place an AMERAUCANA, as they are nothing but out-crossed Araucanas." I, myself, have had similar experiences, when six years ago I pointed out to an APA/ABA judge at a Connecticut show that the bird that he had just awarded a "blue" to as an "Araucana" was bearded and muffed and tailed, and thus disqualified as an "Araucana". His reply was that "the term 'Araucana' doesn't mean anything more than a blue egg layer". Then in Columbus, Ohio, at the 1994 APA National, when I observed that the judge had awarded a "blue" to a large fowl black "Ameraucana", with yellow legs, I pointed out to the judges that yellow legs are a disqualification – and that prompted a loud general discussion among them and others – I overheard a comment that "These Ameraucanas shouldn't even be allowed in the Show – they're nothing but bastardized Araucana." This is stated here just to illustrate how ignorance and ill-feeling persists still today!

The Ameraucana Bantam Club published its fine "Handbook" for members at the end of 1982, with details about the breed and the Club, and listing 36 members. Additional varieties were then being developed, largely by breeders in the upper Midwest. Enough progress had been made by 1983 to attempt to qualify six additional varieties with the ABA and to try to qualify the breed (bantams only) in all eight varieties with the APA. The site chosen was the first-ever APA/ABA joint meet in Columbus, Ohio in November, 1983.

Going into that meet, the Club had 38 members on record. For that Qualifying Meet, Affidavits had to be submitted from not less than five (5) breeders "stating that they had bred the breed for not less than five (5) years, producing not less than 50% of all specimens true to type, color, size, and comb." Don Cable, Mike Gilbert, Jerry Segler, Jaime Ikeda, Bernard Kellogg, John Wunderlich, Bill Wenger, and Harry Cook all supplied the required documentation. This demonstrated a great record of success and consistency in "Ameraucana" breeding. But they knew that they were facing a rather hostile reception in some circles. As Don Cable has written, "Where opposition to acceptance by the ABA had been vocal and obvious, we were to find our opposition in the APA more subtle, among a very few key officials."

That 1983 APA/ABA National Meet turned out to be the LARGEST poultry show EVER held in the USA, up to then, with some 10,400 entries by 717 exhibitors. Six Club members attended and exhibited 75 Ameraucana bantams. Those members were Don Cable, who flew in from California with his birds in a converted steamer trunk; Jerry Segler, Illinois; John Wunderlich, Missouri; Bernard Kellogg, Dave Horman, and Mike Gilbert from Wisconsin; John Fugate, Tennessee; Ray Gwynes, Georgia; Frank Gary, New Jersey; and Bill Holland, Idaho. Jerry Segler had the largest entry. The 1983 Show was the first time that Don Cable had met Mike Gilbert and Frank Gary personally, as well as the others there, after all those years working together! The Ameraucanas made quite a hit at the show, and all the present varieties, except buff, were shown.

Later Don Cable would write, "When we began to put the Ameraucana breed together and standardize the various points such as lobe and shank color, overall size and type, etc., it seemed as though it was an almost impossible task. Particularly since we, as breeders were scattered across the continent, and cooperation, much less coordination, was hit and miss at best. In spite of those obstacles, when we met in Ohio for our qualifying meet, the uniformity of the breed, gathered from all parts of the nation for the first time, was absolutely uncanny!"

The ABA almost immediately informed the Club of the acceptance of the additional varieties, including "buff" (which hadn't even been shown). Those varieties being: White, Wheaten, Black, Blue, Blue Wheaten, Brown Red, Buff and Silver. Fred Jeffery, Secretary/Treasurer of the ABA, and Frank Gary, Chairman of the Standard Revision Committee were extremely cooperative at every step of the qualifying process. By vote of the Club Board of Directors, Frank L. Gary was named our first Honorary Vice-President, and was presented with a plaque of appreciation.

Unfortunately, the APA was not as responsive as the ABA. Although Don Cable and Mike Gilbert waited throughout the APA general meeting for news of the qualification results, no mention was made of the "Ameraucanas", and when they inquired where they could find the Standard Committee Chairman, it turned out that he had already flown home, with all of the records.

Many letters followed, some of which were far less than cordial, and more telephone calls! Finally, at the termination of the next APA National the following year in Wisconsin, Mike Gilbert was present to hear the great news, and Don received a letter from the APA President that the APA Board of Directors had voted unanimously to accept the 'AMERAUCANA' Standard, approving the acceptance of all eight varieties of the bantams, AND THE SAME VARIETIES IN THE LARGE FOWL AS WELL. As Don wrote later, "the officers of the APA had acted in a fair and responsible way, and they have my thanks and support as a member."

After the numbness wore off, the Club was astounded, as they had done nothing to promote the large fowl acceptance, though Mike Gilbert had been working since 1981 with the APA on the possibility of accepting our

“Ameraucana Standard” (for bantams only). However, Tom Lippencott, from Ohio who headed the “Araucana Boosters Club” had promoted a similar breed to the APA for acceptance in Large Fowl, but under a different proposed Standard and under a different name. The APA acted on this initiative, but accepted the name and standards of our Ameraucana Bantam Club.

This action completed the efforts to gain acceptance of the AMERAUCANA breed officially, and the breed and the Ameraucana Bantam Club were off and running! Shortly thereafter, our Board of Directors voted to change the name of the Club to the “Ameraucana Breeders Club”, to recognize the inclusion of Large Fowl to the breed. And thus concludes the early history of the breed and the Club.

(editor’s note: The club forked in 2015 and was reorganized as the [Ameraucana Alliance](#))

