

Chinchilla Farming in Inglewood
307 East Manchester (crossstreet: Market Street)
Prepared by Dr. John V. Richardson Jr.



Figure 1. Mathias F. Chapman with Pete

One of Inglewood's most interesting claims to fame includes farming chinchillas—a small crepuscular rodent, named by the Spanish after the Chincha Indians. Today, these furry rabbit-like animals, the size of a prairie dog, derive from 1) the small Costina (above), 2) the common Lanigera, which is dependent upon the algarrobilla shrub, or 3) the nearly extinct Brevicaudata, but which can live up to 22 years in captivity.

The backstory explains why these animals became such an important industry. When Mathias Farrell Chapman (born 29 June 1882) grew up in Williams (aka Josephine County), Oregon, ads for chinchilla overcoats were already being advertised in the Los Angeles Times. One man “exported 100,000 skins from Chile in 1884...in 1901 fully 1,000,000 skins were exported from that country.” By 1896, chinchilla collars were highly favored and by 1913 these fur-bearing animals were “becoming scarce to supply demand for adornment.” By the time Chapman was in South America in the late 1910s-early 1920s, chinchilla fur prices could double in a year and a single auction lot “brought as high as \$170 each.” A top-quality chinchilla coat, made from upwards of 100 to 140 pelts, retailed for \$35,000 in 1920. Due to their increased scarcity caused by the British introduction of the non-native, predatory red fox, not surprisingly, the Bolivian government stopped Chinchilla exportation for five years.



Figure 2. Chapman in the Andes (1920)

In January 1918, Mathias and his wife Anna were living at 633 East 39th Street in Los Angeles. The Andes Copper Mining Company, a subsidiary of the Anaconda Company in Chile, offered Chapman, an American mining engineer, the position of foreman at the rate of \$250 per month with expenses paid both ways for both of them, if he would stay three years. Later that year high in the Atacama province of the Andes, he encountered his first rodent. As the story goes, an Argentine Indian captured one above the snowline and brought it in a five-gallon can into Chapman's Potrerillos camp. According to Chapman, "the Indian pointed to the can, grinned, and said, "Chinchilla!" He sold it to Chapman.

Apparently, Mr. Chapman had a real fondness for all animals (his hobby was zoology, he hunted as a youth, and kept pets as well) and hence considered himself something of a naturalist. Of course, one can also wonder about the influence of his wife, Anna (aka Annie) M. Carr, who was born 11 February 1886 in Ireland.



Figure 3. Annie Chapman, 1918

What we do know is that he had help from twenty-three hunters for more than three and one-half years, who explored the mountains above the Rio Juncal Valley of Chile looking for chinchillas. With permission of the Chilean government to trap them, they finally found some but took most of 1922 acclimating these creatures by slowly stepping down to lower elevations—according to Chapman the chinchillas’ original habitat was about 16,500 feet elevation. Finally, Chapman wrote that his embarkation point was Iquique, Chile.



Figure 4. Mr. and Mrs. Chapman onboard Anyo Maru

Before departure, the story goes that eleven of his friends said goodbye to the Chapmans in their cabin, each giving him a chinchilla. Of course, the captain of the Japanese cargo steamship, “Anyo Maru,” promptly discovered the animals shortly after they were underway, and so they were placed in pens which were already abroad in the cargo hold.

The founding colony consisted of eleven original members (actually, one died enroute, but two pups or kits were born on the trip) and included three female chinchillas named Dona Inez, Rena de Plata, and Duchess de Tacoman, according to a March 1934 LA Times article (see “The Chinchilla”). The eight males were also named and included Duque de Tacoman, Old Hoff (actually the eighth caught, and so tattooed), Otto, and Pete.



Figure 5. Dona Inez, one of the founding female chinchillas

The Chapmans kept them cool with ice packs, electric fans, and wet towels over the cages, but Chapman told reporters that “when only four days out from California they shed their fur and we had to wrap the whole batch in blankets to keep them from freezing.” And, so on 21 February 1923, they arrived in the Port of Los Angeles (San Pedro) with their small herd of chinchillas.

Based on the April 1923 USDA letter, it appears that Mr. Chapman wasn’t interested in making money as fast as possible because he clearly intended to study them. And, he carried on extensive experimentation for years. On 24 March 1925, “The first pair of chinchillas ever sold in America brought Chapman a check for \$1,000.” Notably, the first sale of a breeding pair (“the 40th female and the 44th male born in captivity”) didn’t occur until 1934, when W. J. Burns of Rochester, New York bought them. Chapman settled in Inglewood, living on South Oak Street in order to become a fur rancher.

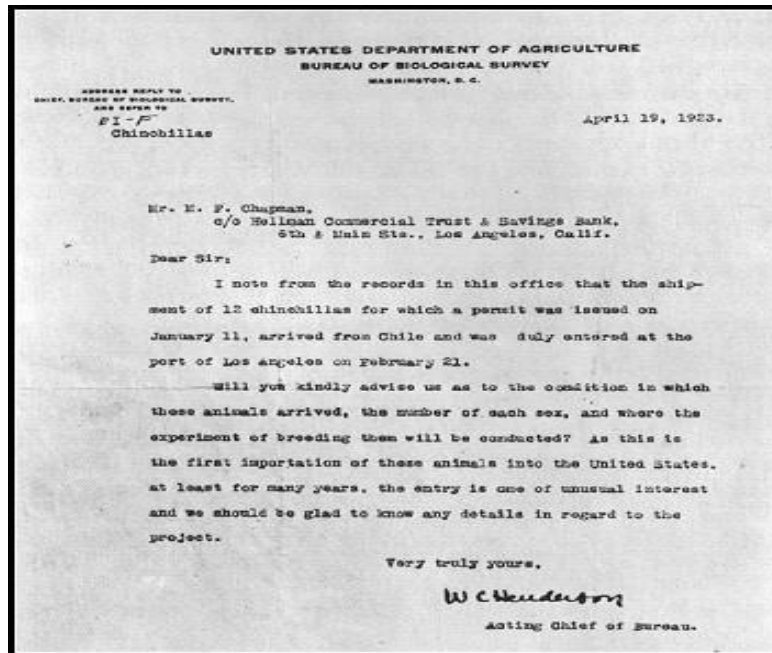


Figure 6. USDA's Bureau of Biological Survey indicating 11 January 1923 emigration and 21 February 1923 immigration

By the 1940s, some claimed that Chapman created the “World’s Original South American Chinchilla Farm,” though technically that distinction belongs to two other guys. In November 1921, two years before Chapman, T.M. Hamlin and W.C. Copper, owned a herd of 40 chinchilla in the Cascade Mountains above Enumclaw, Washington, but their efforts are rarely mentioned in most accounts of chinchilla farming because they weren’t terribly successful, according to the Enumclaw Chamber of Commerce and the local historical society. By 1930, two other herds existed in Idaho Falls, Idaho as well as in Logan, Utah. Nonetheless, the South American Chinchilla Sales Company became quite successful. Originally, the main business office was located at 203 Bank of America Building *on Market Street* and then at 307 East Manchester (nearest cross street, Market Street), but the actual ranch appears to have been located several places.

Inglewood

Its first location was 1629 West 84th Street in Los Angeles—east of the Inglewood Park Cemetery, 2) in Tehachapi (where burglars stole thirty-five individuals, nearly half the herd, and Chapman traced them to Brownsville, Texas on their way to Germany), and 3) by 1926, more permanently at 4957 West 104th Street [i.e., south of Century, near I-405 and may have been called Palm Avenue based on 1934 voter records] in what is Lennox

today. In August 1937, the New York Times described the farm as “A two-acre tract of twenty-six gray and white buildings in an old-fashioned flower garden.” Yet, another location for their ranch is given as the corner of Palm and Oak Streets, on the outskirts of Inglewood in 1933 and 1934. According to the WPA Guide by the mid-1930s, the ranch consisted of thirty units housed 900 pens holding 1650 animals, selling for \$1600 each.

When Mathias Chapman died tragically of a heart attack at the Inglewood ranch in December 1934 (he is buried in Inglewood Park Cemetery; see FindaGrave Memorial ID: 114747737), work was carried on by his son, Reginald E. Chapman (3 May 1907-20 December 1987) of Lennox. Interestingly, he had been raised by his maternal family because his mother, Matilda E. Barrett whom his father married on 8 July 1906 in Oregon, died on 22 May 1907 shortly after his birth; his step-mother, Anna Carr, died in June 1934 and is buried in Inglewood Park Cemetery. Yet, Reginald pressed on with his father’s dream. In September 1936, another twenty breeding pairs valued at \$20,000 arrived by airplane from Lima, according to the New York Times. Despite the lingering effects of the Depression, the chinchilla multiplied and by 1939, the farm consisted of 1800 chinchilla in captivity; a breeding pair sold that same year for \$3200 (elsewhere sources say \$5,000).



Figure 7. 1457 West 104th Street (original building in background)



Figure 8. View of Chapman Chinchilla Farm from the air

Much of the success was due to Mathias Chapman's husbandry skills, his collaborative efforts, and his experimental approach to chinchillas. A 1931 Harvard doctoral dissertation examined the blue-eyed chinchilla. Other collaborative work included ***, a ***, and medical evaluations by Evelyn H. Keagy and Hilan F. Keagy, D.V.M., prominent Beverly Hills veterinarians who worked with the Chapman Inglewood Farm. They staffed its laboratory, and they could perform Caesarean births, when needed, at the hospital in Beverly Hills, according to their son. Dr. Hilan Keagy created a vaccine to prevent chinchilla diseases and published the first scientific articles about chinchillas including "Lactation in Chinchillas," "Toxoplasma in the Chinchilla," and "Diseases of the Chinchilla," thereby becoming their foremost researcher and expert.



Figure 9. World's Original South American Chinchilla Farm (courtesy LAPL)

Under Reginald Chapman's leadership and supervision, Inglewood's chinchillas became well-known throughout the United States as the "Chapman Chinchilla Sales Company" in 1938. In July 1940, he even went so far as to register "480 mated pairs of live imperial chinchillas" with the SEC for sales of fractional units. A 1942 lawsuit involved the Chapman Chinchilla Sales Company v. Johnson (see 49 Cal. App. 2d 195). The Bar-3 ranch owned by Jim Chapman and his mother started their Inglewood ranch with just two pair. Besides the familiar French gray color, he developed mutations which today include Gunning black (aka Black velvet or Touch of Velvet, TOV), Tower beige, and Wilson White. Even the "Rambling Reporter," Ernie Pyle devoted a couple of his columns to these little guys. By the 1990s, these cute furry animals became popular as household pets because their fur is impervious to fleas and dander-free and hence hypoallergenic; and most owners say that they are sweet, easy-going and loving, but produce lots of droppings!

References:

"Chinchilla Farm," Los Angeles Times 18 November 1921, p. II-15.

CHINCHILLA FARM.

*Los Angeles Times (1886-1922); Nov 18, 1921;
ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Los Angeles Times (1881-1989)
pg. II15*

CHINCHILLA FARM.

The latest Northwest venture is a chinchilla farm, where an attempt is being made to breed these valuable fur bearing animals from South America in a mountain meadow of the Cascade Range above Enumclaw, Wash. T. M. Hamlin and W. C. Copper, the owners, have forty young chinchillas for a starter and are convinced they can successfully raise them in these alpine regions.

The Chinchilla, resembling the prairie dog in size and shape, is found in the main range of the Andes of Peru and Chile. Preferring an altitude from 5000 to 18,000 feet, they will thrive nearer sea level if the climate is dry. They breed twice each year, the ten to twenty offspring being about the size of mice. In their native haunts they subsist on chinchilla grass, carrots, cabbage and vegetable peelings. It is said they do not require water to drink.

The value of the pelts varies, but those now imported from South America bring from \$50 to \$80 each. An average coat of 270 skins of the chinchilla is valued from \$15,000 to \$20,000. Owing to the rarity of the fur, it is in big demand from wealthy buyers, and it cannot be imitated by piecing nor by dyeing.

Mirella Poli, An Essential Guide to Owning a Chinchilla (Havant, England, Kingdom Books, 2006).

Includes export certificate of 15 January 1923.



Andrew R. Boone, "Three American Chinchilla Farms Produce Most Costly Furs: Wild Creatures from South American Andes Thrive in Captivity," Popular Science Monthly, December 1933, p. 32-34.

"Life Aim Ends: Los Angeles Times, 30 December 1934, p. 10.

Heart attack at experimental ranch, "located near Chapman's home at [1]0134 South Oak Street."

Life Aim Ends



Mathias F. Chapman, pioneer chinchilla grower, who died suddenly at his experimental ranch at Inglewood.

CHINCHILLA FARM HEAD SUCCUMBS

*Mathias F. Chapman Dies
at Inglewood as Success
Crowns Experiment*

INGLEWOOD, Dec. 29.—Mathias F. Chapman, 52 years of age, who pioneered in chinchilla raising and established the only ranch of its kind outside of South America, died suddenly last night from a heart attack. Funeral services will be conducted at 11 a.m. Monday in the Beaver and Matson funeral chapel. He leaves one son, Reginald E. Chapman of Lennox.

Going to South America on a mining expedition in 1911, Mr. Chapman conceived the idea of raising chinchillas for breeding purposes. The United States and South American governments took an active interest in his project which was established in Centinela Valley after experimentation with other climates in this country.

Success was just beginning to crown Mr. Chapman's efforts after several years of experimenting with the animals whose fur is expensive.

More than two hundred animals have been raised at the ranch located near Chapman's home at 0134 South Oak street.

"California to Raise Chinchillas," [New York Times](#), 1 September 1936, p. 23.

"Chinchilla Corner Held in California: Rare Animals are Practically Extinct in the Andes, Where Mining Man Found Them; 1.108 on coast farm; valued at \$1,600 each, they are guarded by armed men and burglar alarms," [New York Times](#), 8 August 1937, p. 36.

"Asks SEC Registry of 480 Chinchillas: Chapman Sales Company Files Statement for Offering of Live Mated Pairs to Emphasize Absurdity Type of Issue," [New York Times](#), 6 July 1940, p. 1.

Glendon R. Herman, "Chinchillas," [The Farm Quarterly](#) 4 (Autumn 1949): 54-56, 130-132. –The proposed book

Two online sources: "The Chinchilla: The Matthias (sic) F. Chapman Story" at http://www.edchinchillas.co.uk/The_Chin/chapman.html which some good text and photos and "History of the Domestic Chinchilla," at <http://www.chinchillas2home.co.uk/history.htm>, which also has the panorama view of the farm in Inglewood.

Also Herman Schultheis photographs at LAPL

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