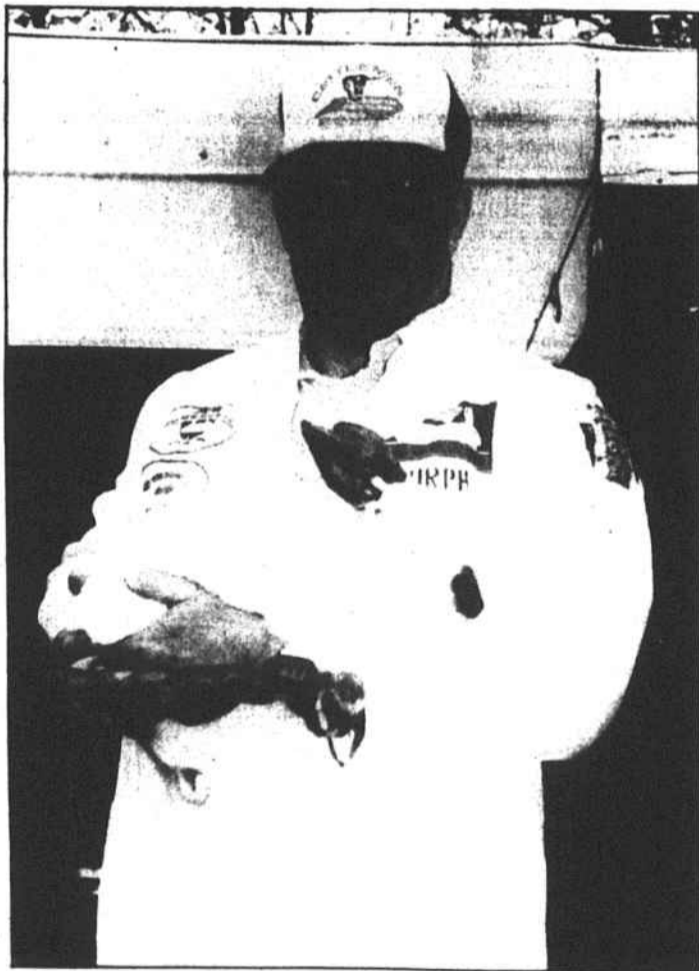


Helping Hand -- 3-weeks old Dutch bunnies in Murphy's rabbit house. That's Murphy's hand nudging one into proper pose for picture.



Virgil Murphy with his California buck named Best Commercial in recent state show.

Rabbit Show Here Saturday

A rabbit show at the new National Guard Armory will share the spotlight Saturday with the Christmas Parade through downtown Raeford.

The show, which will start about 9 a.m. and feature many breeds of rabbit, will be the second annual such event of the Cape Fear Rabbit Breeders Association, whose president is Virgil Murphy of Rt. 1, Raeford.

The first show also was held in Raeford, at the old Armory, and on the same day as the Christmas parade was held.

Murphy said Thursday about 40 exhibitors with about 400 entries from Virginia, the Carolinas and Georgia are expected. The entries will include representatives of breeds ranging from Dwarfs to Checkered Giants.

The judges will be Harry Rice of Portsmouth, Ohio, and Stan Freed of Chester, Va., who have had many years of experience in raising and judging rabbits.

The show will continue till about 4 p.m. and is open to the public free of charge, Murphy said.

Murphy also will be one of the exhibitors with rabbits competing for honors.

He is one of the founders of the Cape Fear Association. It was established eight years ago, with six members.

A Little Bunny Business

For Virgil Murphy Rabbit Raising Has Taken Off

by Bill Lindau

If Virgil Murphy has his way, everyone in this part of the country will be eating rabbit stew.

Murphy, who lives at Rt. 1, Raeford, is the county's largest rabbit grower and keep a herd averaging 150.

As President of the Cape Fear Breeders Association.

Murphy wants to get everybody interested in raising rabbits at home, and he sees them as a source of food (with a chicken flavor) high in nutrition value -- low in fat and cholesterol and high in protein -- and a comparatively cheap food at that.

Murphy also sees them as good pets, too, and he sells some of his from time to time as food and some as pets. He said he sells rabbits as fryers to individuals, not to food markets, and they are ready to cook. He slaughters the commercial rabbits, cuts them up and packages them on his farm, keeping the packages in his freezer till the customers come.

The market for rabbits, he said, brings \$4.50 per packaged rabbit, which weighs four to four and a half pounds, in Fayetteville, and \$5 to \$6 for the same weight in other places.

Basically, however, he said, he is a breeder. He sells about 200 rabbits a year for meat, and this income pays his expenses for exhibiting his animal in shows. The profit margin on commercial rabbit is small, he said: he gets 60 cents per pound live weight commercially, and it costs 40 cents to 45 cents a pound to raise the rabbit.

To expand the commercial market in the area, he said, will take military contracts. Murphy said the Marines have been serving rabbit at their bases for the past several years regularly. If the Army, Navy and Air Force can be persuaded to do the same, the commercial rabbit business will be expanded satisfactorily.

What the U.S. rabbit producers also need, he added, is federal government inspection of rabbits imported from Red China. He said U.S. rabbits have to be inspected, but China rabbits don't.

The breeders appealed to President Jimmy Carter for application of inspection to the Chinese but got nowhere, and now they are seeking the same from President Ronald Reagan.

Murphy indicated their hopes of

success are higher than they were with Carter.

"Maybe Reagan will," he said, "as California has a great many rabbit-producers."

Murphy said the Red Chinese rabbits are poor in quality, consequently make poor eating. This literally leaves a bad taste in the mouths of Americans trying rabbit for the first time and, consequently turns them away from all rabbits, since they don't know the difference between Chinese and American rabbits for eating.

He and the other breeders also want to destroy the myths about rabbits. For example, he said, people believe rabbits make poor eating in the summer because they are bred, the does (female rabbits) are producing milk, and so forth. He said his sales, consequently, slump in summer but pick up quickly when the cool-weather season starts again.

Murphy said he nearly emptied his freezer in a fairly short time this year after fall came. Murphy sells several hundred rabbits from his freezer a year.

He pointed out, however, that this prejudice against "hot weather" rabbits is based on the idea that rabbits are wild. But, he explained, the rabbits produced for the market are controlled in their development by the owners. He said that it takes about eight weeks to raise rabbits to fryer size (about 10 pounds) from birth.

One Murphy rabbit which is going neither to the supermarket nor the pet shop is Tadpole, a 4-year-old Dutch buck. Tadpole is a Grand Champion of his breed. To win that title, Murphy explained, a rabbit has to win at least three "legs" as a breed champion first. He said Tadpole has won "15 or 20." Tadpole will spend the rest of his life, till old age gets him, at Murphy's.

Murphy said a rabbit's life runs 7 to 9 years, averaging 6, as a pet.

Another star in the Murphy hutch is a buck, who hasn't been given a name. This one, a California breed, which is all white, won the title of Best Commercial in 1982. He celebrated his first birthday on October 10.

Murphy also has a New Zealand breed, but he likes to try out different breeds every few years. Next he's going into Chamaignons d'Argent, a French breed, which is born black but whose coat changes to silver as the animal grows older.

Murphy said it is a good commercial rabbit.

By weight, the New Zealand buck reaches 10 pounds and the doe 11 pounds at peak, and the Californians a pound lighter on the average, Murphy said. Dwarfs run about two pounds and Flemish Giants about 20, he added. The heaviest rabbit recorded weighed 25 pounds.

Murphy raises his rabbits -- also some beef cattle, ducks, and 20-plus Guinea roosters and hens, and some regular egg-laying hens -- on his 25-acre farm off the Raeford Airport road.

Murphy said more and more Hoke County people are getting a pair to five or six rabbits to start raising rabbits at home.

The Cape Fear Association has two other members in Hoke County.

Murphy said as many things can be done with rabbit in cooking as with chicken and showed a newspaper clipping describing recipes -- Northern Fried Rabbit, Lemon Barbecued Rabbit, Ragout of Rabbit, Hasenpfeffer, and Rabbit Paprika. There are others.

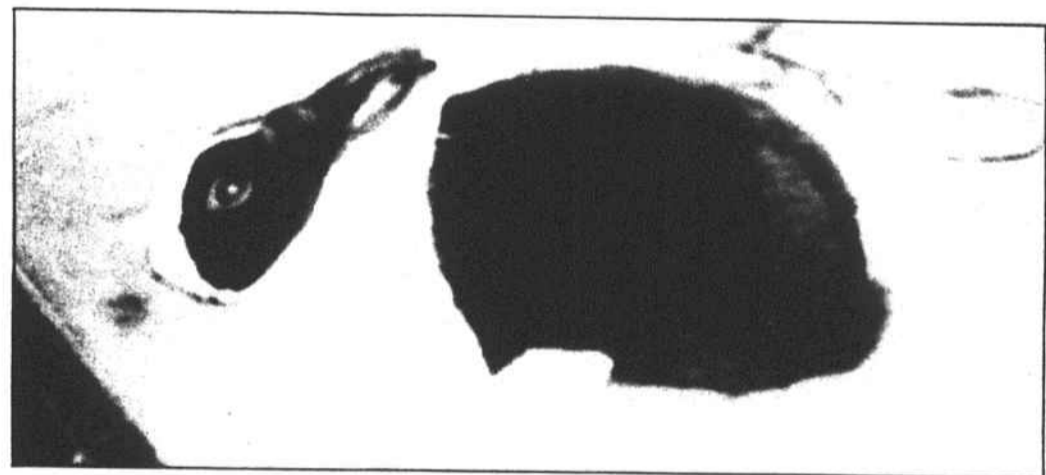
Preparing rabbit for individual customers is one reason why Murphy doesn't need a government license to do the meat preparation. He said the license would be required if he sold the meat to stores. He added, also, that the commercial plants which supply food stores also process and sell the other parts of the rabbit -- hide, feet and pancreas (an ingredient of certain medicines).

Rabbit fur, he said, can pass for the fur of any other animal, but the Rex breed of rabbit is an exception. He said the fur of this breed is such high quality that it is exported to Japan. The Japanese, he said, import very little, a sign of the value they place on the Rex fur.

But, he said, that after a while, as they do with other imported products, they'll be producing their own.

In the shows, the rabbit scorned by the judges because one ear has a spot of color that doesn't conform to the breed's ideal goes to a pet shop -- and some kid will grab it immediately because it does have that funny color, Murphy said.

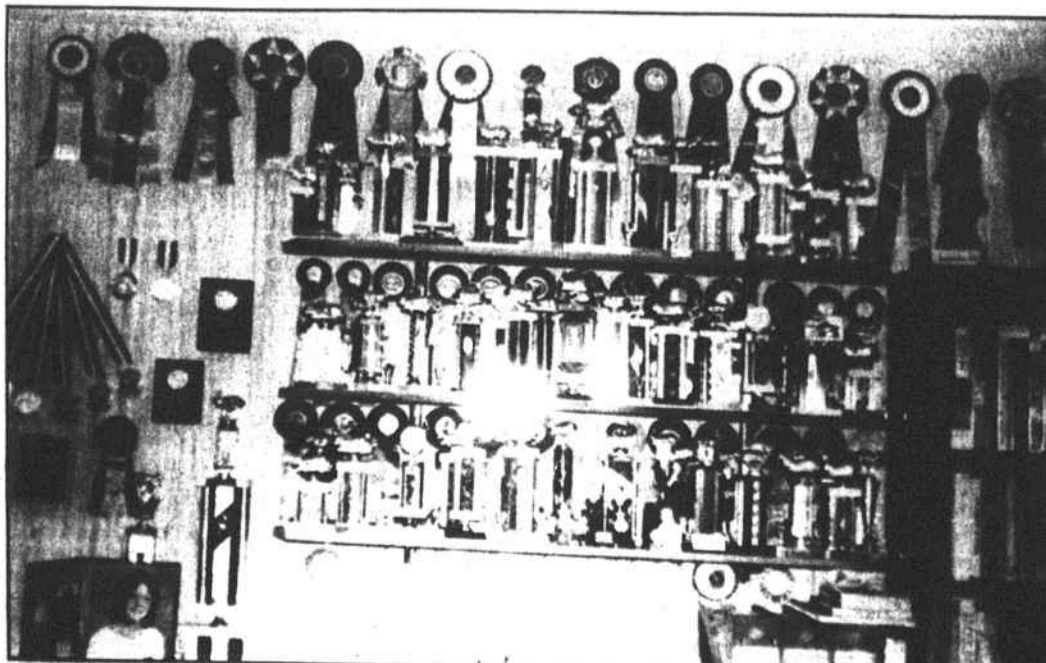
That illustrates a principle of life: one man's loser is some kid's pet.



Tadpole. Virgil Murphy's Grand Champion.



Virgil Murphy (left), holding chocolate colored Dutch doe, with Richard Melton, Hoke county associate Agricultural Extension agent, between rows of cages housing Murphy's rabbits. On the rear wall are some of the many ribbons his rabbits have won in show.



Some of the ribbons, medals and trophies Virgil Murphy's rabbits have won in shows. The photos at bottom left are those of Mr. and Mrs. Murphy's children.