

The Story of AW

How a rare rodent from a far-off land
became a beloved American pet

BY KRISTIN LEWIS AND MELANIE ABRAHAMS



**AS YOU READ,
THINK ABOUT:**

Why do we have pets?

It was 1946, and Albert Marsh of Mobile, Alabama, had just won a bet.
His prize?
A strange creature with soft fur, dark eyes, and remarkably large teeth. It was

tiny—so tiny it could fit in the palm of his hand.

Marsh had just become the proud owner of a Syrian hamster, also known as a golden hamster. He found his new pet utterly fascinating, with its curious personality and adorable cheek pouches. A small number of these rare animals, which are native to (you guessed it) Syria, had arrived in the U.S. just eight years earlier, for use in medical research.

Marsh, who was a bit of a dreamer, became convinced that hamsters didn't belong only in laboratories, they also belonged in the loving hands of America's children. He was determined to turn hamsters into superstars. Yet few Americans even knew they existed. What's more, the hamster is closely related to the rat, a loathed pest that haunts garages and basements—hardly the kind of animal anyone wants crawling around their bedrooms.

If Marsh wanted America to fall in love with hamsters, he needed to get creative.

Pets With a Purpose

Today, the pet **industry** is a \$60 billion business in the U.S. There is at least one pet in 65 percent of American homes. Many of us think of our pets as part of the family, providing us with unconditional love and companionship. But for most of human history, it was often the very wealthy who kept pets simply for the joy of it. For them, a prized beagle or an exotic parrot was a status symbol, like a costly jewel necklace. Everyone else kept animals to do work (though it was common for children to catch and tame squirrels, pigeons, and other critters for fun). Dogs helped hunt, herded sheep and cattle, and charged into battle. Cats were **enlisted** to control mice, rats, and other **vermin** in barns and kitchens.



WWW

Hamsters are all about the leftovers. They store food in their big cheek pouches to munch on later.

BARRY BLAND/NPL/MINDEN PICTURES (HAMSTER)

By the 1800s, attitudes toward animals were starting to change. Many Americans began to see keeping pets as a way for their children to learn to be kind to all living things. At the same time, more families were moving from the country to cities, which meant kids were losing the opportunities they once had to interact with animals on their family farms. Pets allowed kids to stay connected to nature. By the end of the century, the country was dotted with small pet shops, which were filled with all sorts of thrilling creatures: not just puppies and kittens but also fish, guinea pigs, and birds.

By the time Marsh won his hamster in 1946, pets had become an expected part of childhood. But would the hamster be able to join the ranks of America's popular pets?

Getting to Work

Marsh believed the answer to that question was yes. He obtained more hamsters (likely from a nearby research lab) and got to work creating a hamster colony. Because hamsters breed quickly—females carry their pups for only 16 days—he soon had a large supply.

But he needed to make sure that hamsters were as appealing as he believed. He convinced a local store to display 12 of them in a window. In less than one day, every hamster had been sold and the store wanted more.

Eventually, Marsh quit his job as an engineer so he could focus on his new **venture**. “When I came home and told [my wife] I had resigned, she was horrified,” Marsh said in a 1949

The Arabic name for hamster translates roughly to “mister saddlebags.”

newspaper article.

“She prevailed on the wives of my friends to try to talk me into going back . . . before I lost everything.”

But Marsh didn't lose everything. In fact, he was about to get extremely rich.

A Hamster Craze

Marsh proved himself a **savvy** businessman. He advertised his



SHUTTERSTOCK (HAMSTER); DEA PICTURE LIBRARY/THE GRANGER COLLECTION (STATUE); YVES LANCEAU/NPL/MINDEN PICTURES (CAT)

Pets Through Time

Humans have been keeping animals for thousands of years.



ANCIENT WORLD

Keeping exotic pets like baboons, crocodiles, elephants, leopards, and hippos was a sign of power and wealth in ancient Egypt. But cats and dogs were the most popular. Many pets were buried with their owners so they would be together in the afterlife.

MIDDLE AGES

In medieval Japan, fireflies were caged and kept as pets. Meanwhile in Europe, the pets of royals and nobles led privileged lives, with their own servants, feeders, and groomers. Cats wore velvet coats and perfume.



hamsters in newspapers and magazines, both to scientists looking for research animals and to families looking for easy-to-care-for pets. (If you bought a hamster from Marsh, your new pet would arrive by mail in a coffee can with a potato inside to nibble on during its journey.) He self-published *The Hamster Manual*, which flew off bookstore shelves. According to some estimates, he was bringing in \$4,000 a week. (That would be about \$36,000 today!)

Marsh, it seemed, had ignited a hamster craze. It's not surprising. Hamsters make great pets. They are energetic, providing endless entertainment as they flit around their cages or scurry through your house. They are ideal for small children because they are clean, gentle, and easy to handle.

And of course, they are undeniably cute.

Soon, stores across America were selling them, along with an array of fancy accessories, like cages and exercise wheels. In 1961, hamsters even made it to the White House, when President John F. Kennedy gave a pair to his children.

Health Issues

But trouble was on the horizon. By the early 1950s, Marsh's business was in crisis. An increasing number of pet stores had started buying their hamsters from cheap backyard breeders. Then hamsters suffered an outbreak of "wet tail," a disease that is fatal if not treated immediately. Worse, the majority of hamsters in the U.S. had been bred from just one pair—a brother and

sister captured in Syria—and had many health issues as a result.

With so many hamsters dying, it was no longer **profitable** to sell them. Their popularity faded, and Marsh's business collapsed.

Part of the Family

The story of hamsters in America would not end there though. In 1971, an American graduate student traveled to Syria with the goal of capturing new wild hamsters for research. He brought back about a dozen, and interest in hamsters was reignited. Hamsters once again became beloved pets in American homes and classrooms.

Though most hamster-lovers have never heard of Albert Marsh, it is thanks to his vision that hamsters have burrowed their way into our hearts forever. ●



THE RENAISSANCE

Nobles would fork over small fortunes to be painted with their favorite pets.

COLONIAL AMERICA

By the 1750s, American colonists were sharing their homes with small birds, squirrels, and dogs. They referred to their pets as "favorites."



TODAY

Dogs vie for top honors at the Westminster dog show. In 2015, the trophy went to this beagle: Ch Tashtins Lookin For Trouble. (Yes, that's her name.)

Turn the page to read about this guy!



Would You Replace Your Dog With That?

Robots could be the pets of the future.

BY JENNIFER DIGNAN AND SARAH McCARRY

Imagine you wake up one morning to find that your parents have granted your request for a pet. Even better? This pet doesn't shed, claw the furniture, or need to be walked. You'll never have to feed it or remember to give it water or clean up its poop. Your new pet will never get sick, and you can even leave it home alone when you go on vacation.

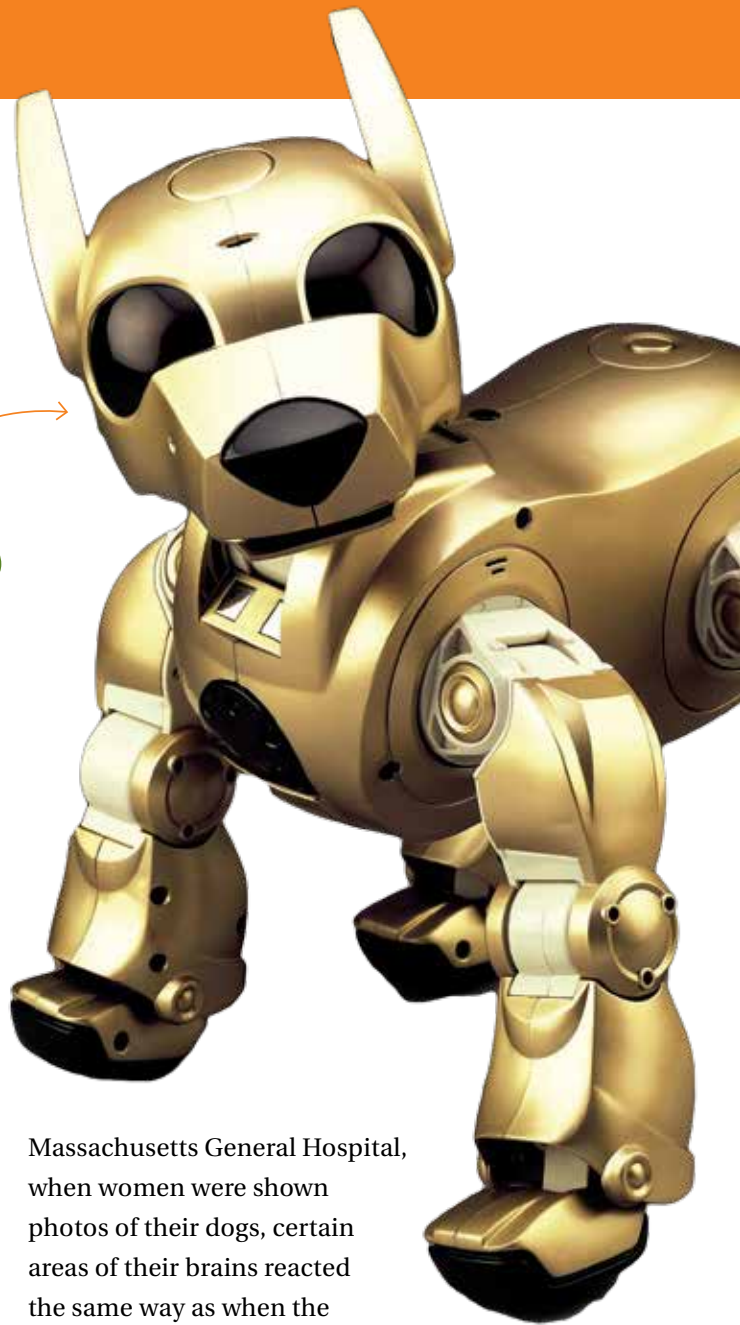
What is this amazing creature?

It's a robot.

Not quite the warm, cuddly, wriggly bundle of love you had in mind? Fair enough. But someday in the not-so-distant future, many of us could be choosing robopets over the real thing.

Robot Bonding

The benefits of owning a pet are well-documented. Research shows that living with a pet makes people happier and healthier. Just recently, a study in Japan found that when dog owners gazed into their dogs' eyes, their brains released oxytocin, a chemical that creates feelings of trust and happiness and helps mothers bond with their infants. In another study, at



Massachusetts General Hospital, when women were shown photos of their dogs, certain areas of their brains reacted the same way as when the women were shown photos of their children.

These studies seem to support what pet owners have long known—that the bond between a human and an animal can be powerful and deep.

Could we really form that same sort of bond with a robot? Could we feel the same rush of love for a machine that we feel for a dog that greets us at the door with a wagging tail or for a cat that, sensing our sad mood, hops into our lap and starts to purr?

According to Hal Herzog, a psychologist who

studies how people interact with animals, robotic pets would have to be highly **sophisticated** to truly win our hearts. “They would need to respond to verbal commands and express needs, desires, and affection for their owner,” Herzog explains.

“Dead” Robodogs

To some degree, robotic animals can already do these things. Genibo, a robot dog designed in South Korea, can recognize its owner’s face, respond to voice commands, and use sounds and movement to express emotions. (It can also do the Korean martial art taekwondo; good luck

teaching your labradoodle that!)

Hasbro’s Joy for All robotic cat will purr if you pet it, and roll onto its back for a belly rub. As technology improves, robotic animals will become more and more lifelike.

But even the robopets currently available can inspire strong feelings. When Sony announced in 2014 that it would stop repairing Aibos (robotic dogs it sold from 1999 to 2006), many owners were heartbroken. In Japan, where Aibos are very popular, some owners even held funerals for their “dead” robodogs. Meanwhile, a robotic baby seal called Paro is having a positive effect on nursing-home

residents, improving their moods, relieving their loneliness, and encouraging them to be more social.

Loyalty and Affection

There’s no denying that robotic animals have some advantages over the living, breathing, shedding variety. Robotic animals are certainly easier to care for. They are a great option for anyone who can’t have a real pet, such as those with allergies. Robotic animals have less impact on the environment than real animals too:

The livestock used for meat in dog and cat food requires a lot of space and energy; pet poop can pollute waterways.

But there are some big questions to consider before we all rush to the store.

There are already millions of cats and dogs in need of homes—what will happen to them if we choose robots instead?

Do we want kids to miss out on the opportunity that pets—real pets—provide to learn to care for another living being?

Is the loyalty and affection of a robot the same as the loyalty and affection of a real dog?

And most of all, do we want to live in a world where we bond with machines instead of with animals?

No doubt we will ponder these questions and others as robotic pets become even more sophisticated and popular. (We’ll know they have finally arrived when a video of a robotic cat goes viral on YouTube.)

For now, though, they remain a **novelty** item—toys rather than replacements for our beloved family pets. ●



Hasbro's
Joy for
All cat



Paro,
a robotic
baby seal

WRITING CONTEST

How has pet ownership changed over time? Do you think robotic pets will ever be more popular than living pets? Answer both questions in a short essay, using details from both texts to support your ideas. Send your essay to **PET CONTEST**. Five winners will each get *Cracker!* *The Best Dog in Vietnam* by Cynthia Kadohata. See page 2 for details.

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