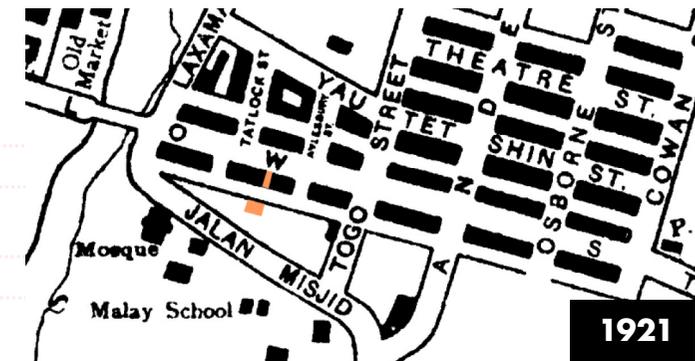


The Bird Shop

It was on Hugh Low Street for decades, as clamorous inside as the town was outside. In addition to the retail shop and a little storage *menagerie* immediately behind it (which existed before there was a Hume Street on the other side), there was also a farm and a flower garden in Pasir Puteh which produced items for sale in the shop.

The business was older than New Town. In its heyday in the '20s and '30s the shop not only sold pets, flowers, fruit trees, and other garden products; it was also something of a tourist attraction, displaying and selling indigenous (*orang asli*) hunting implements, items from traditional Malay and Chinese culture, ivory carvings, and assorted curiosities, including the latest 78-rpm vinyl records from Pathé but hilariously only the ones with the *Chap Ayam* label!

The founder and owner of the Bird Shop was a Mr. Choon. Apart from dealing in all of the above, he used to buy *wild* animals, alive whenever possible, and sell them to Ipoh's wealthy and eccentric.



The wild cats were primarily “leopard cats” or *Prionailurus bengalensis*; the wild dogs were *Cuon alpinus*, known to Malays as *serigala*; the civets included *binturong* (“bear-cats”); the deer included *Tragulus kanchil*. I heard once that there was an orang utan for sale at the Bird Shop, but I never saw it.

A Malayan palm civet (the drawing is from 1894):



Excerpt from the *Irish Times* (January 28, 1937):

Mr. John L. Woods, of Ipoh, Penang, taking endless pains and trouble, had sent a wonderful consignment of animals and reptiles, among them were two on view for the first time in the history of the Gardens; a Golden Cat and a very small Leopard Cat, the latter was beautifully marked and was absolutely untameable—it was as fierce a little devil as was possible to find in the whole of the cat tribe.

So in addition to the usual dogs and cats and aquarium fish and "talking" mynah birds, there were peacocks, and pheasants, and pigeons, and hornbills, and cockatoos, and *wild cats*, and *wild dogs*, and civets, and squirrels, and iguanas, and pigs, and tapirs, and deer, and bats, and monkeys, and gibbons, and cobras, and pythons, and crocodiles, and leopards, and panthers, and tigers, and even an occasional *elephant!*

Among Mr. Choon's many customers were some Ipoh residents whose names today's old-timers might still recognize, including:

- ▷ Foo Nyit Tse, who bought a stuffed tiger for Falim House;
- ▷ Nan Rae (Cecil's second wife), who bred mousedeer in her compound off Tambun Road;
- ▷ Businessman Robert Ng, who kept his animals in his back-yard while complaining bitterly about *his neighbour* being a public nuisance; and, not least,
- ▷ John Woods, who shipped his many and varied purchases to the zoo in his native Dublin, where his brother Bob was on the council of the Royal Zoological Society.