

## PIGEON FLYING IN SEATTLE – “THE EARLY DAYS”

By Bruce Gordon & Harry Ibuki 02/27/1983 Resubmitted by Ski Grabanski

I was at the Greater Seattle Clubhouse the other day for a club meeting when one of our members, Paul Thomas handed me this article that was given to him a while back by Bruce Gordon. Along with the article there were also some old club rosters and a clock or two that at one time belonged to the original Great Seattle Club. After reading the article that was submitted to the ?????? back in 1983, I called Bruce and asked for permission to resubmit it to the Racing Pigeon Digest. Permission granted, so here we go.

Pigeon flying in Seattle had a strange and unlikely beginning. Sometime prior to 1910 a number of old country Belgians living in what was then the city of Georgetown got together to fly birds. Alas, there were no pigeons to fly! These pilgrims got things started by “recruiting” scrubs from the old Seattle Brewery or wherever pigeons could be found. There was no organized club, but this did not prevent these early men from flying anyway. Birds were shipped towards Tacoma aboard the old Seattle-Tacoma Steamships. The first release was when the ship of choice drew abreast of Brown’s Point, the midway mark between the two cities. The “long distance” event was a release at dockside in Tacoma. History does not record how race winners were determined, but in the words of the late Charlie Busch, “Just getting a bird could be enough to win”.

Charlie and his brother, Joe, substantially blunted this first competition by sending East for some real racing pigeons. Taking this cue, the competition retaliated by utilizing old country contacts to bring in racing pigeons that would really race and competition livened up. Race stations were pushed out and Winlock and Tenino were successfully flown in good time. According to Charlie, after one year’s old bird flying, a last do-or-die race was flown from Roseburg, Or. (300 miles) with Birds on the day. Charlie won this race and so laid claim to having the city’s first day bird from this station. (This claim was hotly contested with several flyers claiming “firsts” for this station.)

By 1913 almost everyone in the city has access to racing homers and the impromptu racing of the first years gave way to an organized club called the Seattle Racing Homer Society. It is interesting to note that the club’s first officers were all English speaking—which most of the old country Belgians of that time were not. Communication then and for many years thereafter was extremely interesting. A smattering of Flemish (particularly as regards profanity) was necessary for all flyers just to get by. A roster of this first club (printed elsewhere) shows the international flavor of the club. Represented are Belgian born, plus representatives from Scotland, Wales, Canada and of course the United States.

The earliest club races were flown from the South from many of the same stations flown today. Most of these early flyers favored races up to and including 300 miles, but even then, a spirit of adventure existed. A few hardy souls insisted on long distance races to compete the race schedule and stations were pushed out to Ashland, Or. and to Sissons, Red Bluff and Oakland, Ca. It is interesting to note that day birds in the longest races were long in coming. Not until 1937 were there 500 mile day birds. One of these was owned and flown by Connie Yatsunoff and the other by Deno Baldacci. Later the 500 mile station was moved to Eureka, Ca. Jim Zoellern is credited with having the first day bird from this station, this not until 1955. Long Distance races were also flown from San Francisco, Stockton and other California cities.

The first ever futurity race flown in Seattle got underway in 1918. Bands for this race cost an unheard of 25 cents and John Fordin emerged as the first winner in this race from Salem, Or. (180 miles).

In the year 1921 the club memberships split directions with roughly half the membership remaining on the South course and the other half switching to the East. It should be mentioned here that a number of the Club's membership elected to fly from both directions. Fred Taylor is credited with having the first day bird from 500 miles on the East course. It took the Club until 1941 to get a same day bird from Butte, Montana, the 500 mile station. Perhaps to bring the Club together, in 1925 those flying the South course and those flying East decided on a course from the Southeast culminating in a 699 mile race from Salt Lake City, Utah. Survivors of this adventure would later refer to the experiment as a disaster. Apparently, bird losses were appalling and perhaps for an even once, all flyers were in complete agreement that enough was enough. Once more the membership returned to flying South and East.

By 1938 big things were in the offing. This was the year the Pacific Coast Concourse was formed and the Seattle Club found itself competing against flyers from Portland, Tacoma, Victoria, and Vancouver, B.C. and for a time Spokane also joined in the flying. Remarkably, perhaps, race winners were not strictly confined to one or two areas, albeit it can be noted that Seattle and Portland won the greatest number of races. The race course was from the East, terminating with a 500 mile race from Butte, Montana. This organization lasted until 1951 when the Puget Sound Concourse was formed. The Seattle Club joined this new venture in 1953 and the East course was finally abandoned. To their dying days, most of the participants in the Pacific Coast Concourse regarded this as the "Golden Age" of pigeon flying in this region. Perhaps it was!

A few foot notes on early flying in Seattle might not be amiss. Until the early 20's brass numbered countermarks were used exclusively and the old country Belgians at least resisted almost until death the eventual transfer to rubber countermarks. Most of these Belgians favored the Benzing clocks they brought with them from the old country. These were "two-fisted" clocks, huge in size and very cumbersome. Most were started in the "open" position. Tape perforator was then unheard of. Gradually, the Plaschart timers (both Robert and Alfred) were added to the list. It should be mentioned that two bird timers, both Unique and Union were in high favor in these early days and continued so for many years.

Many of the pioneer flyers took into eternity the belief that the birds they flew “away back when” were equal in every respect to the birds of today. The difference between early flying records and those to come was in training they contended. Early training was done by bicycle, horse and buggy and later the Model T. The old Everett-Tacoma Interurban also rated high in favor for express and a hop to Tenio was considered adequate training for any pigeon. If, as we moderns contend, the records of the pioneers did not match those of ours today, perhaps the main reason is that Widowhood flying was to these early aces all but unknown. The immortal Connie Yatsunoff might have been said to have used “Semi-Widowhood” in that he is known to have practiced many of the methods of today as early as 1930.

If added reason is needed for the comparatively lesser performance of the city’s early flyers, it can be found in the fact that the Belgian born at least placed pigeon eating on a par with pigeon flying. In many instances, pairs were allowed to breed all year long and the unwanted squabs, as well as race day failures, were joyfully ingested by their owners. Feed may have been said to have played an important part in the sometimes-shaky performances of these pioneers.

Chicken scratch was often the breeding-flying feed fed to early flocks. Whole corn was also very often the entire diet of the town’s early racers, with perhaps a diet of barley in the off season if continued young bird breeding was not desired. Connie Yatsunoff once said he “imported” mixed pigeon feed from Philadelphia and fed this year around to his charges.

As to strains flown, Wegge, Hansene, Grooters, Gits etc., were cultivated from the earliest times. However, in the case of the early Belgians, many of the strains flown were known only to themselves. They were avid readers of the Belgium periodicals and they knew when a housewife was treated to a trip back home, ostensibly to meet family and old friends, but primarily to pick up a few pigeons for their spouses to fly.

Bird shipping over these early years was divided between two locations. The first of these was Julius “Jules” tavern and the second was the garage of Louie Bauwens. From these two locations, the birds were taken by horse and buggy to the Railway Express Depot in South Seattle. In later years, birds were both basketed and shipped from the Railway Depot and crates were stored there between races.

It seems inconceivable that until the early 20’s speeds were calculated entirely by hand. Professor Fordin and later Bob Gwilym did most of the calculations. Finally, John Fordin got his way and a rebuilt calculator was purchased for figuring races. If club members were backward about the use of a calculator, they were “modern” in one respect. From the early 20’s on, the typewriter was used for race results.

It might be of interest to describe a few of the pioneer pigeon people who were to shape the whole history of pigeon flying in the city.

**CHARLIE BUSCH:** Charlie may well have had the longest flying career in the whole history of pigeon dome. He started out as a very young man in Belgium and his flying career continued well into his 83<sup>rd</sup> year. He and his brother Joe may be said to be Seattle's first flyers. When the pair came here in 1908 they found no racing pigeons as such to fly. Undeterred, they picked up "commies" and flew these via the old Seattle-Tacoma Steamships. Later the pair sent "East" for racing pigeons and so wiped out their early competition.

Charlie laid claim to having the first ever bird from Roseburg, Or. this in 1919. Mrs. Busch made a number of trips to Belgium and on each voyage picked up a few birds for Charlie. Some of his early success were achieved with strains called Bernharts and Lamotts. Later he flew Bekaerts and did exceptionally well with these.

Charlie's major successes were all achieved flying a family of grizzles, origin subject to question. One of these gave him Seattle's first 600 mile day bird winner ever and the same bird won "Best in Show" in an area show judged by Piet DeWierd.

In his later years, he imported both Dockers and Vanbruaenes from Belgium. He flew these birds straight and crossed with outstanding success, but once admitted that these imports did not best the performance of his old Grizzle family.

When eternity caught up with Charlie at the age of 95-plus, it wrote "finis" to a flying-breeding career that future generations can only hope to match.

**JOHN FORDIN:** It might well be said that without John there would have been no early history of Seattle to record. The city's early flyers were great on flying, but by and large refused to have anything to do with the administrative side of the sport. As an educated man, John was called upon to do most of the early race secretarial duties. He figured race speeds and got out race results and did so with flair. He may well have been the first race secretary to use a calculator in figuring race speeds.

One of John's greatest accomplishments was to organize a pigeon exhibit at one of Seattle's famed sportsman shows sponsored by the long defunct Seattle Star. One of the converts he attracted was the famed Connie Yatsunoff. He gave Connie his first birds and one of these, a hen named "Cleo", turned out a number of outstanding young for Connie. John, himself, was a tough competitor on race day and in his time of flying won many races.

For many years, the good professor was in heavy demand as a judge in area pigeon shows and it is noteworthy that his winners were invariably good flying birds and not just pretty. Since earliest times our man has been given recognition as the region's expert on feather. Long before the fad of feather reading was ever heard of.

John is the very last of the pioneers and at this writing is still alive in his Wenatchee, Wa. Home.

**ROBERT GWILYM:** Bob was a Welshman and one of the earliest to fly pigeons in Seattle. He served in the U.S. Army Pigeon Corps, from 1918 to 1921, the only local to so serve. He flew only on the South course and had some outstanding wins to his credit by the time his career closed. His "Swift" was second in the Club's 1917 race from San Francisco (679 miles). His BC hen, "Arroline" won second in the Oakland (677 miles) race in 1921.

Like professor Fordin, Bob's main contribution to the early days of flying in Seattle was on the administration side. He split secretarial duties with John and did much of the early race calculation for the club in which he flew.

Bob's loft was in a coal bin in the basement of his sister's home in Seattle. His career was abruptly terminated when a nesting hen he had turned loose to exercise flew across the huge view window of a neighbor's house and unloaded as she did so. Within an hour the gendarmes and the health department were on hand to close his operation forever.

Perhaps Bob's main claim to fame was as the unofficial historian of the area. He could recite race winners from earliest days and could back up any declaration he made with written proof by way of race reports. He could well be remembered for another reason. Early Seattle flyers (particularly the Belgians) were known to settle things by way of violent arguments. Bob would sit through the storm of words until he had enough. Then, in a quiet voice, he would recite the facts of the case and the argument was over.

Perhaps a single word would sum our man up... he was a "gentleman"

**ADOLPH VANHOUTTE:** "Dolph" came to this country as part of a Belgian army contingent brought here to promote war bond sales in World War I. He so liked what he saw that he resolved to return and in 1922 he came back to stay. He was one of the best liked pigeon flyers ever to fly birds in the Seattle area and one of the very few Belgians who would impart useful information to new flyers starting out.

He was an outstanding flyer, but by his own admission, not a breeder. At any given time Dolph's loft contained birds from just about every loft flying on the Seattle scene. He once said "that his countrymen would never give him birds because he would beat them with their gifts."

Dolph won from just about every station on both the South and East courses. He was proudest of his first and second place wins from Sacramento, Ca. This was accomplished with nestmate brothers. In 1966 he won first overall, first out of area in the Puget Sound Futurity with a bird from Ed Herbsleb of San Antonio, Tx. Ed responded the next year by winning that city's Bit Futurity with a bird from Dolph.

If summation is needed, Dolph was a champion flyer and certainly a first-place winner as a human being.

**CONRAD YATSUNOFF:** So much has been written and said about Connie that it is hard to separate fiction and fact. Suffice it to say he was one of the city's all-time greats, if not the greatest. Although he is not properly a pioneer in the sport (he started flying in the mid 20's), his accomplishments were so many that mention is certainly deserved here. He was certainly a pioneer in the respect that he practiced innovations in flying that were virtually unknown at the time.

Although he did not fly Widowhood as such, he employed many of the tricks of this method to speed up his race entries and where his clubmates got birds by ones and twos, he got them in bunches. Connie founded a whole dynasty of winning pigeons on a single bird. His "Mike" (believed to be Trenton) produced countless race winners, not only for our man, but for many another. Late in his career he brought in some Mahaffey pigeons and these flew beak to beak with his Mike family. Crosses between the two families were devastating on race day.

Though impatient contemporaries, he was kindness personified when it came to kids. To these he gave his best, along with sage advice on how to fly his gifts. He was a giant in the sport and is sure to be remembered for a very long time.

#### **OTHER PIONEERS**

It would be impossible to list the accomplishments of all of the pioneer flyers in Seattle. However, some of these early ones certainly merit at least passing mention.

**S. VAN GEYSEL:** Came to Seattle from Belgium in 1909. He is believed to have been a participant in the "scrub flying" of the pre-club days and a member of the first real club. He, too, was a tough competitor at all stations but favored the long ones. His "brag" bird for all times was a race winner from Stockton Ca. in a race flown in 1919.

**THE BAUWENS BROTHERS:** Louie and Carl certainly merit mention as top flyers in the early days of flying in Seattle. Each had his own family of birds and were equally potent on race days. For many years, the Seattle Club held its meetings in Louie Bauwen's garage. Birds were also shipped from this location.

**PETE MARTILEZ:** Pete came from Belgium in 1916 and soon thereafter went in the U.S. Army and served during World War I. He was a top competitor and won many races. His "Blondelle and Coopmans" pigeons earned local fame as outstanding hard weather birds.

Space does not permit mention of the names of all of the city's first flyers. However, a study of the first club roster will divulge the names of many who enjoyed the thrill of victory and the agony of defeat not unlike we of today's pigeon flying.

## **ROSTER OF SEATTLE RACING HOMER SOCIETY IN 1913 TO 1920**

Lou Gregson, Andrew Grieg, Robert Gwilym, Louie Bauwens, Carl Bauwens, Pete Martilez, Bodo Hoffman, Joe Busch, Charlie Busch, Joe Smet, C. Hazelle, Silvester VanGeystel, Jim Wynant, E. Franssens, J. Lukens, Walter Haskins, Harry Thompson, J. Funk, Frank Fauconnier, John Fordon, W. Davies, Arther Demetzner, E. Eckhout, Paul Cooper, Arther Dulong, H. Vergote, A. Van Daels, Phillip Debels, Julius Stock and Ernes Dierick.

What I find of interest is that the Greater Seattle Club of today is as diverse as it was in the beginning in the early 1900's. Today we have club members from Canada, Mexico, Romania, Poland, The Philippians, Ireland and the good old U.S.A .