

## A Real Gentleman From The Old School

# Meet Mr. Lee M. Ford

By W. R. HEFNER

For many years I have noted that at most gatherings of pigeon fanciers, the name Lee M. Ford is almost invariably mentioned at some point. Always, too, I have heard only complimentary things mentioned in connection with this name. I have also lived long enough to know that such as this is most uncommon, as it seems everyone has his critics no matter how hard he tries to please. Often times the criticism may only be a statement of jealousy, but at any rate, still a negative voice. In this one instance, however, that being the gentleman Lee M. Ford, I can unequivocally say I have never read or heard any adverse or critical word of any nature regarding him. I have heard only tributes.

The name Lee Ford has always been associated with the finest. As to the racing pigeon fancy, his name has always been associated with the Gurnays. In fact, here in the United States, I believe it could be unquestionably stated that at one time Lee M. Ford had the finest stud of pure Gurnays direct from Renier Gurnay that ever came to this country. While this in itself was an accomplishment and commanded a great investment, the even greater achievement and tribute to this was that from this wealth of stock the offspring poured in many directions. In reality, Mr. Ford was a philanthropist in disseminating this stock.

I doubt if very many individuals would have made such an investment and then in turn been as generous in spreading the good from the source with very little thought of ever regaining or recapturing any part of the enormous investment. And, **enormous** is the correct word in describing the investment made by him. Mr. Ford, over a span of a very few years, actually invested thousands of dollars in the best Gurnays obtainable from the champion himself—Renier Gurnay. Mr. Ford didn't do as most fanciers would and purchase the offspring from Gurnay's champions—no, he purchased the champions themselves.

His first importation from Gurnay was in 1920 and he imported additional champion stock from Gurnay each year from some six years. So outstanding were these birds, that Gurnay himself even later acquired birds from Mr. Ford to revitalize his own stud. At Gurnay's own request, Mr. Ford raised youngsters for him and shipped them back to Belgium. Gurnay desired these as they were descendants from the best of his own strain and due to the fact they had been produced in another country, he felt he would get the same benefits as an outcross by using this same blood.

Through these business dealings, Lee Ford

and Renier Gurnay became good friends, and Gurnay more than once invited him to come to Belgium and stay with him at his residence. Tempted as he was, however, he was not able to make the trip. Mr. Ford told me in one of his letters that today he certainly regrets not having accepted one of these invitations. However, with business pressures and a family to consider, he felt it best at that time not to accept Gurnay's invitation to make such a long trip. A trip of that length, before rapid commercial airplanes, would have taken a good deal of time. Mr. Ford, in his reminiscences, though, has referred to this more than once and has also repeatedly stated that these early years with his Gurnays and this friendship with Gurnay are among the happiest years in his memory.

Mr. Ford today is in his 80th year and still lives on the same ranch in Montana where he was born. His father, as he told me, was a bull whacker on the Santa Fe and Oregon trails and later a wagon boss or wagon master. He brought in twelve wagons of merchandise with bull teams to Deer Lodge, Montana Territory in 1863 and also trailed the first herd of cattle to come north of the Missouri River in 1870 from Colorado. Later in Montana he bred horses and cattle. Lee Ford has told me that in years past he too has also bred registered sheep, horses and cattle as well as his racing pigeons. As his profession he became a banker and is still today. For many years he was bank president and today is Chairman of the Board of a large 70 year old Montana bank.

Do you begin to see just what a colorful, interesting and diversified gentleman that is Mr. Lee M. Ford? Knowing just a part of this had intrigued me for years and the more I heard the more interested I became. Finally, toward the end of last year, I decided to locate Mr. Ford if at all possible, and so set out to do so. Fortunately, a good friend of mine living in Montana, as it turned out, not only knew of Mr. Ford's whereabouts, but knew him personally. This friend supplied me with his address and discussed with Mr. Ford the fact that I wished to contact him. My friend again bore out what I had always heard of Mr. Ford and wrote this of him, "I have known Mr. Ford since I was a boy and have had many opportunities to enjoy his company over the years. He is truly a gentleman of the old school."

I can certainly attest to this personally as Mr. Ford has truly been kind to me in my quest for information. Not only did he answer my numerous questions about himself, but in addition, he supplied me with priceless quantities of information about the Gurnays and Renier Gurnay himself. So kind was

Mr. Ford, that he sent to me many of his treasured and irreplaceable possessions, including priceless old photos, correspondence, pedigrees, periodicals, etc. He assembled an enormous amount of information and sent this all to me as well as taking the time to outline practically the entire history, as he knew it, of Renier Gurnay and the Gurnay Strain here in America and in Belgium. To me the possession of this information is priceless and at a future date when I am able, I will compile this and share it all with you through the columns of the ARP N.

For now, I'll give just a brief history of Mr. Ford's most famous Gurnays—Mr. Ford had raced pigeons for many years before 1920. He had purchased birds from several outstanding lofts in the United States. He had subscribed to the publications of the time, both American and English, and had read many articles about the amazing gentleman Mons. Gurnay and of his achievements. These articles created for Mr. Ford, a desire to acquire some of this Gurnay stock. His first purchase of these birds was in 1919 and these were Shaw-Gurnays. Mr. Ford states that he did not like these birds as the quality was not up to his standards and so decided to contact Gurnay and purchase direct from him. This he did and made his first importation in 1920, purchasing yearlings for \$150 per pair. It was soon after this that he began purchasing Gurnay's champions. Such champions were Chequered Excellence and mate, for which he paid \$550 for the pair. For First Prize Vierzon and mate he paid \$350, and also \$350 for La Tache and mate. Among other famous champions he imported were Noyon, Telephone, who was a brother to several of O. I. Wood's winners which he purchased from Gurnay as youngsters; Twelfth Prize Bordeaux, a son of Chequered Excellence; and the Dark Hen, sister of four of Gurnay's great champions and who produced excellent specimens no matter which cock bird she was mated to. These are but a few; for between 1920 and 1926 Mr. Ford imported 30 of Gurnay's finest. Mr. Ford became known as an authority on the Gurnay strain, of Gurnay's methods and also about Mons. Gurnay himself. In face, he was invited to write an article about Gurnay by the editor of the British Homing World to appear in their 25th anniversary issue. Fred Shaw wrote him and told him that he believed that Mr. Ford had as fine a loft of Gurnays as existed anywhere. The late George Greenshields of England, the famous exhibitor of racing pigeons, contacted Mr. Ford several years ago and tried to arrange a meeting with him just to discuss the Gurnays.

It is not known if Mr. Ford was the first to import stock from Gurnay to the United States, but it is unquestioned that he had by far the best. Gurnay was at his prime during these years and this gave Mr. Ford the opportunity to purchase the finest. Not only did Gurnay sell his champions to Lee Ford, but from time to time he also sent him, as gifts, many of his outstanding yearling hens and cocks. Gurnay did not just offer



MR. LEE M. FORD

certain champions to Mr. Ford, but offered to sell to him any bird in his loft no matter what its record was. Mr. Ford says of Gurnay, that he understood his strain of birds so well and had such ability that he was able to dispose of his greatest racers and still go on winning just the same. Mr. Ford told me in one letter that Gurnay had an almost uncanny system, as he could sell his outstanding champions of each season and still be right back on top with new champions the next season.

Not only were they outstanding racers, but also beautiful specimens in appearance. Gurnay won consistently in the show pen too, and knew that his stock was unbeatable. When Lee Ford purchased Chequered Excellence from him, he made this statement to Mr. Ford, "This bird is a first class breeder and unequalled in the pen and if you show him and he is ever defeated, I will send you ten pairs of birds as compensation."

Gurnay had a strong desire to export some of his stock to the United States and it was through Mr. Ford that he accomplished this. It must be remembered that Gurnay was a very wealthy man in his own right and he did not need to sell stock. He sold of his best for the love of his own stock and to make sure it would be perpetuated. Gurnay, however, put great value upon his champions and asked a great price so they would go to good hands to be appreciated and cultivated. As I am sure you can see, this combination resulted in the friendship and trust between Mr. Ford and Gurnay; for when they dealt, they were both mature and successful men each in their own right—Mr. Ford being at that time about 40 and Renier Gurnay about 60.



The late MONS. RENIER GURNAY

Mons. Gurnay was also very generous with his knowledge of racing pigeons and passed this on quite freely to Mr. Ford. Gurnay supplied his widowhood methods, his feeding methods and selection and dozens of other important facts. As Gurnay did not speak English, this was all done through an interpreter: Mons. Gurnay dictating to a French interpreter who translated the material and sent it on to Mr. Ford in English. An interesting fact mentioned at times by the interpreter in his notes to Mr. Ford was that "the material was very technical and difficult to translate from Gurnay in it's exactness."

Mr. Ford put Gurnay's widowhood method into practice quite early and did well with it. He flew with a small club which raced from the south. They flew from Utah up across Wyoming and into Montana. I am sure that while flying, Mr. Ford won more than his share of prizes, but in his letters to me he always tried to minimize this fact. On one 400 mile race, for example, I know that when flying widowhood he sent nine birds over this southern course traversing the Rocky Mountains. The birds were liberated early in the morning and late that afternoon the entire nine birds returned together being the only day birds in the club. As generous as he was with his stock, however, it took very capable handling on his part to win, as most members of his club were flying birds from his own stock. They too had become fascinated by the Gurnays which Lee Ford so generously supplied to them.

With business pressures and the problem of there not being enough hours in the day, Mr. Ford after flying the Gurnays very successfully for several years, finally retired

from active flying. I will always believe that he actually loved his birds much more than he did the actual racing part of our hobby. As he had the best which were already proven, it was certainly not necessary to re-prove their abilities.

From then on what time he could spare was spent solely in the personal enjoyment of his birds. In one of his letters to me he wrote, "La Tache was my favorite bird, a wonderful specimen. When I came into the loft he descended to the floor and pulled my shoelaces. A Belgian friend of mine, who was a crack on eye color, using a magnifying glass, found that La Tache's eyes glowed like molten metal. We examined hundreds of Gurnays over the years but never found an eye like his."

Throughout every letter Mr. Ford always speaks affectionately of his birds. His memory for recalling minute facts about his Gurnay champions is fantastic. His champions had been proven by Gurnay. Many of them were purchased by Mr. Ford while at the pinnacle of their winning careers. He retired them and they became his pets and so remained with him. It was their progeny who became so widely dispersed and were flown so well by Mr. Ford, other club members, and fanciers in many other areas of the United States. I have personally corresponded with several fanciers who acquired stock from Mr. Ford. All speak highly of both these birds and of Lee Ford, praising each resoundingly. One fancier acquaintance still has offspring which he can trace to stock purchased from Lee Ford in the mid 1920's. This same Gurnay stock is still performing dependably for him with recent old bird wins up to 500 miles over a tough Northwestern course. Others have lamented, however, of the tragedy of letting these birds slip through their hands over the years.

This stock at one time was tested throughout most of the United States. I have heard of numerous fanciers all up and down the Pacific Coast flying them with enviable results. Others I know, flew them with success in the east and in several parts of the mid-west. Undoubtedly there were many others unknown to me.

Mr. Ford disposed of some of his stock in the later 1920's, but retained a nucleus of the stock he loved so much until the end of 1937. By that time the old champions had passed away and he had retained 16 sons and daughters from them. With increased business responsibilities, the problem of an impending loft relocation and an antagonistic city council thinking about a zoning ordinance prohibiting the raising or flying of pigeons in his city, Lee Ford decided to dispose of the remaining colony.

A Los Angeles fancier had shown a strong desire to cultivate a colony of Gurnays and had approached Mr. Ford seeking a foundation. Again, Mr. Ford demonstrated his generosity and presented the remaining 16 Gurnays to this fancier in December, 1937. They remained with this fancier from that time on and their progeny were flown by him until

his death sometime after. Where the survivors went is unknown.

Ironically, all within this span of less than two years, 1936-1938, Gurnay too, disposed of his stock. Most were disposed of in a Christmas 1936 sale and only a few pets were retained until his death a year later. So ended one of the greatest fountain-heads of racing pigeons with Gurnay's death, and also one of the greatest colonies of Gurnays ever established when Lee Ford disposed of his last stock in 1937.

Mr. Ford has mentioned in several of his letters, while reminiscing about his birds, that he often wishes he still possessed some of those marvelous Gurnay specimens. We probably all wish the same and would equally be ecstatic with just the possession of one or two pairs. Because of Mr. Ford's generosity, however, some of these birds' descendants are still with us and still winning, which I think is a tribute to both the founder of the strain and the man who was really the pioneer founder in establishing the Gurnay Strain in the United States: Mr. Lee M. Ford.

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## Florida State Assn.

The 1962 young bird racing season is now in full swing throughout the Sunshine State, and this year more clubs and more members will be flying the largest number of birds ever raced in the history of the sport in Florida. It is the hope of your writer that every veteran flyer will do all he can to help the new and younger flyers in his club. I believe it is the only way the sport will grow as it should here in our State.

The annual meeting and show of the Association will be held in Daytona Beach this year on December 16th. Your show committee is now hard at work to make this the best show ever in Florida. Winners of the Florida Hall of Fame Awards will also be honored at this time.

Don't forget—if you had an old or young bird with an outstanding flying record this year to send in your application to Jerry Pillus, Cocoa, Fla. Your club president and secretary must sign it and mail by December 1st.

Now is the time to say (YES), I will be in Daytona Beach; I will show my best birds, and will attend the meeting. This is your Association and you as a member, if possible, should attend to help run it.

**Flying Around the State:** In the South Florida Combine, Bob Williams of the West Side Miami Club started where he left off in old birds by winning the Combine's first 100 from Ft. Pierce with 1011.33; Hamilton of the same club was second with 1000.17. The second 100 mile Combine race went to Britt of the Broward Co. Civil Defense Club, with 1047.59. . . . D. Blackstone was on top in the West Side Club's 100 frown September 1st, with a speed of 1035.20. . . . The Jacksonville Club flew a 100 mile special September 2nd with 20 members shipping 179 birds—Bob Bernard won it with 1072. . . . In Missileland at Cocoa, the annual young bird show of the Gator Homing Club drew 114 entries, with the Pillus' Loft winning best bird in show, best grizzle and best black; Moffite—best bronze and best AOC; Jack Keen—best red check and Anchor Loft best blue check. The judges were Arthur Wheatley and Harry Maley.

**Florida's Who's Who**—Here is Waldo Hotchkiss' candidate for this month: Sam Hansen of Largo is one of the greatest pigeon men I know. Sam and his former partner Morris Gordon were All-American winners several times. Great handlers they are with great pigeons. (Strain is Osman and I love to hear Sam say "Ossman.") Mr. Hansen is a great pigeon judge—he judges on racing qualities, not on showy appearances. He has visited me two or three times and never has failed to tell me which birds were the most likely candidates for those long, tough 500 miles.

His wife recently had a dangerous operation, but she is well now and Sam, who was plenty worried, is regaining his lease on life. We salute Sam and wish him continued health and happiness in pursuit of the sport.

—Johnnie Johnson.