

# GURNAY A FOLLOWUP

*Submitted By, Hal Conn*

As I consult my notes and talk to my computer, I realized that much of this will be gibberish to the reader who lacks any historical background on the **GREATEST STRAIN IN THE HISTORY OF RACING PIGEONS.**

I refer you to three specific articles by Tom Smith in July/August, and September "NEWS", Bill Hefner, "News" of July/August, 1994; and Hal Conn, "News" of January, 1990. In addition, there is a wealth of information in the book, "Racing to Win," by Fred Shaw in numerous articles in Squills and the USA pigeon press.

There are at least four Gurnay experts better qualified than myself to be writing this. Tom Smith and Bill Hefner have both indicated a desire to write a book on Gurnay and George Dorer and Dr. John Kazmierczak have spent great amounts of time researching books, correspondence, and pedigrees.

Perhaps this article, or series of articles if that eventuates will stimulate the others to add to our knowledge. One of my personal irritants is the mispronunciation of Renier Gurnay's names. To put that in perspective, imagine someone habitually mispronouncing YOUR name, and I believe that most of us would take exception to the practice. Phonetically in the Belgian, it would be "Renyay Goornay," the final a vowel being hard as in "hay," not "nee," as in knee. Further, the accent is on the second syllable, not the first.

I have come upon two priceless sets of correspondences and I would like to comment upon them in this effort. One is from A.F. Brown, the English Gurnay expert, to Frank Soares, then of Rhode Island,, who

imported birds from Mr. Brown. The other is from Fred Shaw of England to Ernest Desirio of New Jersey. For this latter material, we are indebted to John Kazmierczak.

Readers who are up on Gurnay history will remember that Shaw was the first importer of Gurnays into England. It was said of him that he was an extreme egoist, but in current Americanese, he not only talked the talk, but he could walk the walk.

The years 1921 to 1925 found him dominating the Manchester Flying Club, 200 to 250 members; a club roughly the size of the Verviers club, which Gurnay topped for 30 years. How poorly we can comprehend those numbers. For example, at last report, Florida had fewer than 500 flyers in the whole state. In those years, Shaw entered ten races and won them all. It was as if he were content to sell birds and live on his reputation, thereafter. He entered a few races in the next few years, but his real competition was ended.

Fred Shaw and A.F. Brown lived their lives near Manchester, in western England, near the Welsh border. Both acquired Gurnays; were convinced of their vast superiority to other strains, and never looked back.

Beyond that were vast differences between the two men. Shaw flew the Gurnays competitively for only five years. Brown flew them for 30 years. Shaw was a merchant; a seeker after publicity, who would sell to anyone willing to pay the price. Brown, like his mentor Gurnay, was reluctant to sell birds to people who might be able to compete with his in the future

Shaw had few or no friends. Brown joined with many other Gurnay fans to exchange birds and information. He counted among his friends: William Streeter, O.I. Wood, George Snell, the Hart Brothers, the Perkins Brothers, and his American friend, Frank Soares.

Shaw sold birds to anyone with the price, but he offered little information about his so called, "Shaw-Gurnay" system. His letters to Mr. Desirio and

others were merely arias to his own greatness, both as a flyer and as a breeder.

Brown had little good to say to others about Shaw; mainly pointing out that he (Shaw) had become a merchant of pigeons which had not been flown for thirty years.

Further, Brown asserted that race birds could not be confined for several generations without degeneration; a claim which has been disproved with the advent on the current scene of the Hart Gurnays; bred by Dave Seidman of Queens, New York. These birds; dormant for many generations, have taken up where they left off as champions (in the right hands) worthy of the finest of the original Gurnays.

Both Shaw and Wood found themselves living in a postwar England in which everything was rationed. Further, the British Government was concerned with the balance of payments and would actually increase the feed rations for pigeons if the English fanciers would sell to the USA or other countries whose currency was desirable.

I fear that no American who has not been there will really understand. We saw Coventry, the favorite target of the German "Buzz" Bombs when there was not a brick atop another. People stood in line (queued) for the most basics of survival: bread, coal, kerosene.

Shaw was a staunch Tory; he blamed everything on the socialists and communists and longed for the return of Churchill. Brown seems to have been apolitical. Both accepted with gratitude food packages from Soares and Desirio. Brown once sold a prized cock to a farmer/fancier in return for some corn to feed his remaining birds.

Both fanciers kept about 40 pigeons, even when feed was available. Now in the USA, we have countless people who raise twice that many young birds. How far have we strayed.

Shaw sold birds to Lee Ford of Montana; one of the first Americans to

become aware of the mighty reputation of the Gurnays. However, Ford was not satisfied with the type of birds he received from Shaw and then applied to Gurnay himself. Gurnay was not reluctant to sell birds to England or the United States. He just didn't want to fly against his own strain in Belgium. Shaw, of course, did not mention Lee Ford again.

However, Shaw did sell birds to Americans besides Mr. Desirio. Prominent was a Mr. McDermott, of Fall River, Mass. I have no further info on this fancier. Perhaps my good friend, Frank Soares, can tell us more about him and what happened to birds.

Also, in 1945, he sold 3 pair to Mr. Roland Porth. Unfortunately, this fancier crossed them out with Dordins and other strains, and the greatest strain in the world was lost. How sad.

Shaw died in 1951. His loft man, Robert Clark, viewed himself as a partner in the Gurnay venture. Unfortunately, Mrs. Shaw saw him as an employee, so Clark returned to his native Scotland, and the birds were disbursed.

Brown offered comments to Frank Soares in each letter. History, methods of breeding, training, and racing were covered.

Examples (in no certain order): Racing in England is much more difficult than in the USA because of the climate and the terrain. For example, after release from Lerwick, the birds must immediately negotiate 60 miles of water. Florida fanciers should identify with this comment. There was a movement here some years ago to fly from Cuba. It was a disaster. Only a champion will cross 60 miles of open water. Because of the handicaps there, a single bird, even a champion, can fly no more than one 500 or 600 mile race per year. Any attempt to send him a second time results in a lost pigeon.

The "correct" Gurnay eye is dark. This may refer to the "Belgian" eye, which has the colors of the Belgian flag: Black, Brown, and Red. However, the champion, "Young Hawk," of O.I. Wood had a violet eye. We used to

see this eye years ago, but it is virtually nonexistent today.

Young birds should not be raced, but should be trained 50 miles North and South. Yearlings may fly 250 to 300, but the best flyers and the most fun are 3 years old and up.

The cross may give instant success. A Wegge/Gurnay cross may fly better as a youngster or a yearling, but the 3 year old straight Gurnay has no equal. Training tosses of 30 to 50 miles; then long jumps and long periods of recuperation.

Environment will change handling methods and winner type. A small youngster can win short races in England but it takes a bigger bird to excel on the longer, harder races. The key word is, "clumsy." A bird can be big, but he must not be clumsy.

Some good looking birds don't fly. Some good flying birds are not handsome. But good flyers are easier to breed than good breeders. Both Shaw and Brown mentioned Captain Caiger, who was one of the first "international experts" to visit the USA. Both thought eyesign was hype.

Hawks were a problem, even back then. I wonder if they were "endangered"

In settling birds to a new loft, bear in mind that it is a slower process for some birds than others. Be careful not to sell yourself out of "quality." One bird introduced for a cross has no chance of success.

A fancier must consider temperament when mating two birds.

Finally, this we have discussed in the Gurnay Club, but since Brown raises the point and we run into this frequently in the Gurnay pedigrees, what do you call a red check or a silver which has large black splotches in its feathering? Most of the pedigrees I have seen, call it, "Mealy." George Dorer, I believe, calls his, "Ash Red." In a chat I had with Bill Hefner recently, he mentioned that some call it, "Mosaic." I believe that according to the geneticists, a true mosaic has two different patterns on its wings. Comment?

## In Memory...

### George Dorer

George Dorer, 83 of Columbus, GA, has gone to the great loft in the sky. He suffered from a multitude of ailments, was a diabetic for many years, had some lung and some heart problems, and the doctors discovered at the last that he had lung cancer.

He was a longtime member of the AU and of the CGA club in Columbus, in addition to being a charter member of the Gurnay Club.

George was a career military man, achieving the rank of Master Sergeant. He was awarded a battlefield commission during World War II and had a host of medals and special recognition items.

When he retired from the military, he stayed on at Fort Benning as a civilian supervisor of recreation. Thus, he called all of his friends, "Coach," and we responded in the same way.

I first met him in 1979, when I was looking for some Gurnays. After some correspondence, he agreed to sell me 8 youngsters, and in due time, I arrived


with my two crates and funds for 8. We hit it off immediately, in that way of true friends, and he gave me his whole young bird team - 30 odd youngsters. Those birds were the backbone of my loft and put me up near the top of the race sheet, particularly on the long, tough ones.

Coach became one of the best friends of my life. Although he was only 3 years older than I, it seemed at times as if he had been.

His first wife, Edna, died some years ago after a series of strokes, and, after a bit, he married a neighbor lady who had been friends with both of them for many years.

Stefie was his companion, nurse, and loft manager during his long, final illness, and we all mourn the passing of a great man, a true historian of the Gurnay strain, a warm personal friend, and the all time champ at writing pedigrees.

The CGA Club and the Gurnay Club will not be the same without him.

**Hal Conn, Purlear, NC** 

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