

# The Emperor

by Hal Conn  
in consultation with  
George Dorer  
Dr. John Kazmierczak

## FORWARD

*Homing pigeons were used in ancient times to send news of victories and the like. With a bow to that important history, I would like to concentrate on the related but advanced modern form of the racing pigeon.*

*In Belgium, in the middle of the nineteenth century, pigeon people were not known for their record keeping, but a few salient facts have survived the ensuing century and one half.*

*The major figure in the development of the racing homer was Mons. U lens, curator of a zoological gardens in Antwerp, Northern Belgium. Along with his assistant, Beernaerts, he produced a strain which, within twenty years was to be found represented in every loft in Belgium.*

*Meanwhile, some parallel but unrelated work was being done in the Liege/Verviers district in eastern Belgium. An important figure was Mons. Dedoyard, who gave Alexandre Hansenne's brother two eggs while the lad was on his way to a dance. The eggs were forgotten in Hansenne's coat pocket until after the dance. The two boys; then living at home, had no hope for the eggs, but they were placed under a foster pair and hatched to found the Hansenne loft and provide the bronze color which is still found.*

*It may also have been Hansenne who blended the two types through exchange with Vekemans of Antwerp.*

Renier Gurnay was born in Verviers, Belgium, in 1864. He grew into a strong, athletic young man, with that combination of intelligence and desire to succeed which is often seen to be genius.

Gurnay became a merchant, invested wisely and was a highly successful and wealthy man, apart from pigeons.

Alexandre Hansenne was perhaps a dozen years older than Gurnay. Hansenne, a baker, had his lofts over his bakery, as was customary in Belgium at that time.

This was the pre-clock era, and each flyer had a time allowance to get from his loft to the clubhouse. Naturally, most of these men who were past physical prime,

or at least, out of condition, employed runners. Inevitably, the young and swift Gurnay became Hansenne's runner in 1883, when Gurnay was nineteen.

Gurnay was able to found his own loft on Hansenne pigeons given to him by the master or purchased. The birds were predominately dark check or blue with a sprinkling of bronze, white flight, and red.

A distasteful but important point must be noted, during occupations throughout history, troops and officers have always been billeted in the best local quarters. Gurnay was forced to house German troops in World War I. There is absolutely no evidence of any collaboration. In fact, Fred Shaw asserts that Gurnay interceded on behalf of several local flyers whose birds were threatened by the occupying forces.

A subsequent riot by local people resulted in considerable damage to the Gurnay property. We are told that he sued and recovered a substantial sum.

This explains to some extent why many of the English historians choose to ignore or down play the Gurnay accomplishments.

The Gurnay pigeons were of the Hansenne or "Liege" type; short legged, broad breasted and backed; with bold rounded heads and a thick strong tail. They were noted for heavy, thick, beautiful feather and for a strong love of loft and nest. A photo of Vielle Bleue; the hen given to Gurnay by Hansenne on the day she won a race is still in existence. Any of us would pay huge sums for such a bird today.

Eyes were of varied colors. The champion, Le Bossu, had a violet eye, which reproduces rarely today. The chocolate eye is still prized, and the Belgians spoke of the "national eye," having the three colors of the Belgian flag; black, yellow, and red.

It has been said in modern times that our politicians can speak of sums in millions with impunity; nobody can really understand what such sums mean. I believe that this is so with Gurnay's records; they are so large as to defy our understanding.

His racing career spanned a half century, from 1880 to 1930, and in that time, he was basically unbeatable. The Belgian system offers a prize for a given entry of birds, and with TWO HUNDRED FIFTY members in the Verviers club, Gurnay was the "Champion," (most prizes) for THIRTY YEARS!!

In addition, the Belgians indulged in "doublages," that is, doubling the bet. In his career, Renier Gurnay won over a million of today's dollars!!! As our late Senator

Dirksen said "A million here and a million there, and pretty soon you're talking about real money." during the height of his career, Gurnay flew a team of 20 widowhood cocks and regularly shipped 3 or 4 to a race.

In the last year in which he flew, St. Vincent, a NINE YEAR OLD cock, finished 20th from St. Vincent, Spain, competing against several thousand birds!! Here are some of the stations and distances: Montargis, France 211 miles; Chateauroux, France 323; Limoges, France 385; Perigueux, France 440; Santander, Spain 540; St. Vincent, Spain 560.

I find it interesting that we are told that Hansenne was a long distance specialist, but that Gurnay confined himself to races under 450 miles. Obviously not true.

Although Gurnay occasionally flew hens, his serious racing was all done with widowhood cocks. Yet did not fly young birds at all (so much for young bird futurities), and felt that yearlings were unreliable on widowhood. However, as noted, those carefully nurtured two year olds flew up to age nine. How far we have gone astray! And how appropriate is the name bestowed upon Gurnay by the champion, Georges Gits (the title of my paper) "THE EMPEROR."

It should surprise nobody that he was untouchable in the shows: 1,2,3, and Championship against 816 competitors; 1,2, against 312 competitors; at a Brussels show, he entered 3 birds and won 1,2, and 4.

Small wonder that the show specialists: Greenshields, Peck, and others used the Gurnays as a basis for their show type birds.

Gurnay's system was pretty standard widowhood, with little new information in it. I was impressed with his meticulousness; keeping weights on each bird; tempting the morose widowhood cocks with special small seeds. Another interesting, point is that he force flew his widowers every day for one hour; regardless of the weather. Finally, he fed a paste of butter mixed with some ingredients which were secret. He claimed that it built strong bones.

Gurnay claimed that a good big bird would beat a good little bird, I have not found this to be the case; however, I attribute the difference, not to my ignorance, but to the differences in climate, Belgium as against the Sun Belt, USA.

Again, with patience a big young cock, allowed to develop at his own pace can fly well as a mature old bird, even in our climate.

Gurnay was generous with his birds; selling and giving them away. However, his iron-clad rule was that no Gurnays were ever to come back to Belgium.

The influences of Renier Gurnay; where to begin? It is known that he acquired birds from Paul Verhoye, a Belgian champion of the time. I do not find any record that an exchange was made, and we have Fred Shaw's word that Gurnay would not allow any of his birds to be owned in Belgium.

Fred Shaw was born in 1877 and knew of Gurnay and his fabulous birds by the turn of the century. Shaw had some difficulty in getting to meet Gurnay or to visit his loft. Surely part of the problem was the language barrier, they could not communicate without an interpreter. Apparently, also, Gurnay, like many other champions had encountered his share of dirty tricks.

We know the story of our own Charles Heitzman of Sion/Stassart fame, who caught a visitor sneaking eggs into his pocket. Shaw relates a similar experience, whereupon he managed to "bump into" the visitor, smashing the egg's in his pocket.

Shaw was able to provide letters of recommendation and through Pauline Gurnay, was able to visit and buy a pair. I believe that this was in 1913. Shaw relates that they became fast friends and claims that Gurnay even viewed Shaw as a better racer than himself.

In the spring of 1914, Gurnay had English bands on some youngsters and had considerable trouble convincing the Germans that he was not an English spy.

In 1919, after the end of World War I, Shaw again imported a goodly number of Gurnays, was wildly successful in flying them for six years, and disseminated them throughout England.

The next English Gurnay men of note: A.H. Turner, about 1921, William Streeter and A. Brown, who were friends and exchanged birds in the early '20's, and O.I. Wood, who had birds from Streeter and Brown and imported birds from Gurnay in 1920 and 1921. All probably had birds from the final disposal sale in 1936.

Wood flew from 1910 to 1940 and was a long distance specialist. His champion was Young Hawk, a dark check cock, who was hatched in 1923 and won 17 of 19 races from 1924 to 1928.

The following English flyers probably had birds from the 1936 sale and perhaps sooner;

George Snell

Perkins Brothers  
Eric Craven  
Tom Watson  
Ted Hart  
Bruce Beebe

The "next generation" included;

Mellor & Son  
Hilton & Son  
R.G. Silson  
Michael Stalker

Of these, the only English fanciers who have kept them straight (to my knowledge) are Beebe; Tom and Ian Watson; and Michael Stalker.

There are perhaps two others, but they do not respond to correspondence.

Americans and some sort of chronology are;

	Circa
Lee Ford, Montana,	1919
imports from Shaw,	
didn't like them so	
later imported from Gurnay	
A.J. McDermott, Mass. (Shaw)	1920
Dr. Betzer, Pa.	1923
Robert Howlett, Mass.	1923
Mr. Lean, Indiana	1923
A. Mix, Mass.	1924
H.H. Kangeter, South Carolina	1924
H. Smith, Pa.	1928
A.H. Bancroft, Mass.	1930
W.B. Magner, Cal.	1930
W.B. Wilson, Cal.	1930
C. Cornish, New Jersey	1931
E.G. Himmelberger, New Jersey	1931
A.F. Weigman, Iowa	1932
J.E. Bremen, New York	1928
Charles Koons, Pa.	1938
S/J. Edwards, Pa.	1938

Frank Soares, Mass.; about 1940 a highly successful flyer who provided many fine birds for others. May still be living, but I've had no luck in making contact.

Mike Kolar, Pa, 1946

Jim Lyons/Webb Boegeman; about 1950-60, San Diego, Cal.; imported from R.G. Silson, Hilton & Son, and Perkins Brothers.

George Dorer, Columbus, Ga., good flyer, fine friend, who has given many fine birds to lucky recipients.. 1950

Tom Smith, New York, about 1950; Avona Lofts, Ireland; Bruce Beebe; Tom Watson; Perkins Bros.

Tom Nettis, New Jersey, about 1970,

imported from Mellor and Craven.

Dr. John Kazmierczak, New Jersey, about 1980, imported from Snell, then got the remainder after Snell's passing. Also imported from Watson and Beebe and has shared the blood most generously. Now has the last of the Ted Hart birds via Dave Seidman, Queens, N.Y.

Noel Orr, Pa, late 1980's, imported from Michael Stalker

Hal Conn, Fla., imported 1980 from Snell,

Apologies for errors or omissions.

A Brief Glossary of Belgian (French) Terms as Used By Pigeon Fanciers

Bariole' (Barjole)	Pied
Beau (Bo)	Handsome, Masculine
Belle (Bel)	Pretty; feminine
Bidet (Bidey)	Pony
Blanche (Blash)	White
Bleu (Bleh)	Blue
Boeuf (Bof)	Ox or Bull
Bon (Bo)	Good
Bossu (Bosy)	hunchback
Casse' (Kase')	broken
Claire (Kler)	light blue check
Coeur Sur Le Dos	
(Koer Sur Le Dose) - Heart on the back	
(The name of one of Hansenne's champs; a lighter heart shaped patch of feathers on a dark check. Perpetuated by Gurnay, but evidently later lost.)	
Donkeren (Don-Ker-En)	dark one
Ecaille (E-Kay)	check
Favori (Fav-E-Ri)	favorite
Fille (Fiy)	girl
Gorges (Goraw)	throat
Gurnay (Goor-Nay')	
GREATEST FLYER IN THE HISTORY OF THE WORLD	
Jeune (Yoen)	young
Joli (Joli)	pretty
LE Fonce' (Lay Fonsay)	the dark one
Le Gros (Lee Gro)	the big one
Modele (Model)	model
Petite (Peh-teet)	small, little
Plume (Plym)	feather; mostly primary flights
Productrice (Pro-dyk-tris)	stock hen
Raye (Ray)	stripe
Tache' (Tashay)	spot or stain
Velours (Velour)	velvet
Vielle (Vyey)	old (feminine)
Vieux (Vyo)	old (masculine)