

# A LITTLE GURNAY HISTORY & OTHER INFO

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It seems that never more than two weeks ever pass that some fancier or former fancier doesn't write me or telephone me to talk about the Gurnays. I believe this is because there probably never has been any strain of racing pigeons that had such an impact upon the fancy, as has the Gurnays, beginning well back before the turn of the century and continuing up until the present time.

Renier Gurnay was a very successful businessman, who resided in a palatial chateau in Verviers, Belgium during the first part of the 20th century. But, this was the same Renier Gurnay who was a runner for Alexander Hansenne back in the 1880's and, who as an excellent athlete, ran on foot to the local club center or designated telegraph office with the first arrival in his hands. Remember, this was at a time before fanciers had time clocks. The geographical area for a club, at that time, was a very small area, sometimes maybe only a few square blocks and, as timing clocks were non-existent, the only way to show your first arrivals was to get the bird to the center as soon as possible. Sometimes, in larger races or area races, the telegraph office was designated as the center to where the birds were carried.

Canadian fancier, E. Banks, in his 1948 book "Classic Racing Pigeon" tells of meeting with Alexander Hansenne at his lofts in Verviers, Belgium, when he was only 12 years old. At the lofts, he states, was a boy not much older than himself. Mr. Banks continues, "He was a chunky, blue-eyed fellow named Gurnay, whom I later found out was Mons. Gurnay",

It was right there, at the lofts of Alexander Hansenne, that Renier Gurnay got his start into the sport of pigeon racing. Gurnay's first birds were gifts from Hansenne and it wasn't long before the pupil was challenging the

master. Several of Gurnay's early loft members were Hansenne's champions, as Hansenne, at times rewarded Renier Gurnay with the winning bird when he successfully ran the winning bird into the local headquarters.

As most of you already know, Renier Gurnay founded his strain with the Hansennes and continued to acquire them from the master and was a purchaser of additional stock at the dispersal sale of Hansenne's stock, after his death in 1903.

As I have always tried to explain, the Gurnays are an improved Hansenne in appearance, with an expanded range of colors, a darkening of the eye, and an improvement in the density of feathers. To make these changes, Renier Gurnay didn't use the Hansenne bloodlines as the only foundation of his strain. Gurnay added other outstanding birds from time to time, as he found them. Probably, his foremost later additions came from Paul Verhoye, of Coutral, Belgium. This is where the red came into the strain and which was around 1912.

Up until that time, most Gurnays were the blue bars, blue checks, dark checks and bronzes. Among these, also, were the ever-present white flights, splashes and piers, which Gurnay did not really like and tried to eliminate from his lofts. This, he found to be virtually impossible, as these splashes and others persisted. Mrs. Gurnay, not being active as a fancier, but only a casual bystander, always preferred these splashes, piers and white flights and so placed most of her wagers on them. These birds were often referred to as Joli de Madame. One of these birds, a blue white flight, named Le Joli Madame, became a famous producer for Gurnay.

Gurnay's climb to the top of pigeon racing in Europe was meteoric. His contemporaries recognized this, Mons. Georges Gits proclaimed him

as "The Emperor". His wins were fantastic, for example:

In 7 racing seasons, he won almost a quarter of a million dollars, using only 25 birds.

In one season alone, he won almost \$50,000.

Another season, he won \$20,000 in just 8 days with only 6 birds.

In one Grand National from Angouleme, 1643 birds competing, he entered only 4 birds and placed 1st, 12th and 38th.

In the National Vierzon, 351 birds entered, he won 1st and 2nd. He entered only 2 birds.

In addition to the Gurnays having been quoted as being the World's greatest winning strain of racing pigeons, they were also universally admitted to be the most beautiful birds. Example, during this same period, Gurnay entered his birds in the Liege Grand Exposition, 816 birds entered, the Gurnays placed 1st, 2nd and 3rd. How good were they in the Show Pen, Example:

**CHEQUERED EXCELLENCE**, a late bred 1920's show record:

1922 - Liege Show: (1400 birds) 1st Place;

1922 - Verviers Show: 1st Place;

1923 - Liege Show: 1st Place

1924 - Brussels International Show: 1st Place;

1925 - Jubilee Show, Verviers: 1st Place.

(In one of these shows, Mons. Gurnay entered 18 birds and won 17 places.)

Chequered Excellence was a winner at flying too, in 1922, when entered in the race from Orleans, 420 Kilometers, he won 1st Place, and he also produced winners. (Lee Ford later purchased Chequered Excellence and his mate from Mons. Gurnay for \$550.)

Gurnay's successes continued,

becoming greater yet. His fame spread and calls came for his birds from many parts of the world. Wherever they went, success occurred.

In England, Fred Shaw set records, which have never been eclipsed. In my correspondence with the late Wing Commander, Lea Rayner, he told of the immediate successes of the Gurnays in England. Of Fred Shaw and his Gurnays, he said, "Besides being probably the greatest racing pigeon trainer of all time, Fred Shaw was a remarkable character in other ways. He was like most exceptionally successful men in any field, a tremendous egoist. It was this which probably made him unpopular. The fact that he usually succeeded in backing his boast with resounding accomplishments, no doubt made matters worse." Fred Shaw's successes with the Gurnays are told in his book, "Racing To Win".

O. I. Wood, of Ilkley, Yorkshire, England, also acquired a number of Gurnay birds direct from Renier Gurnay about this same time. O. I. Wood's Gurnays were mainly the dark bronze color. He became very famous with the performances of two of these birds, "Hawk" and Younghawk". And what did Younghawk do? He won 1st, 2nd and 3rd Prizes in 5 years for O. I. Wood, as well as winning 95 1st Pool Prizes.

Gurnay's birds were in the United States by the early 1920's. Many of our fanciers were hearing about Gurnay's successes and the successes of other European fanciers flying the pure Gurnays.

Lee Ford, of Great Falls, Montana, brought in the first major group of Gurnays to America, purchasing them directly from Mons. Gurnay. Prior to that time, the only Gurnay stock coming to America, came through a broker, Samuel Gibson, of Boston. Over the years, Mr. Ford purchased some 30 birds direct from Mons. Gurnay. Mr. Ford said that over the years, Gurnay gave him the opportunity to buy all of his champions. Gurnay was such a master breeder and so confident of his ability that, one time, he told Lee Ford that if he were to sell all of his birds and

could secure La Tache, Telephone, Noyen, Vierzon and their mates back from Mr. Ford, that he would be back in the running again. Mr. Ford said of Mons. Gurnay, "Let me state here that he was very honorable and my dealings with him were most enjoyable".

The Gurnays imported by Lee Ford were so outstanding, as specimens of racing pigeons, that they attracted visitors and well known fanciers from all over America, who came by car and train to view these birds. Mr. Ford mentioned often in his letters of making hotel reservations for visitors, who came from all parts to see these Gurnays.

Other American fanciers continued to import Gurnays on through the 1920's and 1930's and up until World War II. As Renier Gurnay was getting older, he had a disposal sale of the majority of his birds Christmas Day of 1936. He retained a few and bred from these up until his death. Mrs. Gurnay disposed of these after his death, a number of these going to the British Isles. The Gurnay stock was preserved by a number of English fanciers during World War II and by the end of the 1940's they were offering to sell this stock to American fanciers.

I saw my first Gurnays about the end of 1949 or early 1950, when the late James Lyons, of San Diego, California, and some of his friends began importing the Gurnay stock. Over the next 10-15 years, Jim Lyons imported a great number of quality Gurnays. These came from R. G. Silson, Arthur Hilton & Son, the Perkins Brothers, J. E. Hart and others.

Importing birds, at that time, was so much easier than today, as there was no quarantine. For example, the seller would basket the birds and take them to the airport, where they were put on a plane, usually S.A.S., which flew over the polar route, and Jim had the birds in his loft the next day. I remember well a group of birds imported by Jim Lyons from the Perkins Brothers of England, the trip didn't seem to be any harder on them than any overland trip to perhaps the 200 or 300 mile race station.

As a result of all of these importations by American fanciers, to Lee Ford in the 1920's and to Jim Lyons in the later 1940's to the early 1960's, American fanciers ended up with the world's best collection of Gurnays. So anxious were many European fanciers for American Dollars, that they sold all of their best Gurnay stock, leaving them with little or nothing to produce from. Fortunately, some of us here recognized and appreciated the beauty, quality and abilities of the Gurnays and have preserved them. Today, I believe the world's fountain head for the Gurnay strain is right here in the U. S. We imported the best and we still have them.

Well, enough for now, if you have enjoyed this and would like to read more about the Gurnays, I have mountains of additional materials.

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