

News from Belgium

FROM THE 18th TO THE 20th CENTURY

Translated by Paul Veegaete

An interesting question is "How long has competition in its present form existed and were the pigeons the same at the beginning as those of the present time?"

To answer that question we must go back to the shocking year of 1789 when the French revolution broke out. The terrific turmoil that the entire western society went through gave the push to new proportions in the pigeon fancy. Before that time, keeping pigeons was a privilege of the noble. The "third status" did not have that right.

The noble lords, among them those who lived on the Loire, had special pigeon towers (or turrets) on their castles where great numbers of half wild pigeons lived. These beautiful castles which with the cathedrals, are an integral part of France's glory, still stand there and there are still numerous pairs of pigeons around them that nestle in the towers and shooting holes.

In Belgium, I know of an instance where these towers are rebuilt into modern pigeon lofts, where the medium distance races are flown. I refer to the installations of Xavier Dumont de Chassart or Villers-Perwin in the district of Charleroi. A few years ago when the lord of the castle was still an active pigeon fancier, I was invited out to select or cull the birds. He had about four hundred of them and enough room for twice that number. The birds sat in the four towers with high protected walls that were very thick. When his birds took off into the air they obscured the sun, that is how large the mob was, but from the outside you could not even see any lofts.

Since 1789 a lot has changed in the world. The noble does not participate any more in the pigeon contests. Representatives of the "third status," whose passionate hobby it is now, number over half a million in western Europe. The foundation was laid even in the times when the armies of the little Corsican flooded over Europe. In the district of Liege races over hundreds of kilometres were organised in 1818. The winning birds were triumphantly carried through the city with the music band at the front and the youth behind them so that everyone could admire the winners, and the race was the topic of the day.

That such triumphal marches meant appropriate propaganda for the youthful fanciers, there is no doubt.

The Walloon Doctor Chapuis is the man who collected the oldest data, in his book "Le Pigeon Voyageur". In 1832 the fanciers of Verviers flew their pigeons from London. Becoming more daring through success a race was organised from Lyon which also was crowned with success. The four winning birds were painted in natural colours. They were well-formed hens of the purest Liege strain with shiny black feathers, short beak and frills on their chests, like the Cravate pigeon.

Transportation was at first by horse and cart. Later, rattan baskets were used and carried on the back. There were about 200 birds in the short distance races and the birds' feathers were stamped because rings were not used at that time. Four carriers were usually hired for these races. There were usually less pigeons in the longer races and only one carrier was necessary. The poor birds were in the basket for about two weeks before they were given their freedom for a race of four or five hundred kilometres.

Certificates were given where they liberated through the town official as proof of the fact "that the carrier had faithfully carried out his mission". A certain Pinet head of a pigeon club at Huy, between Liege and Namur and still a mighty pigeon centre, was a pigeon carrier for twenty years. Many times alone, or if there were too many birds, with his helpers, he walked on foot to Besancon, Metz, Arleons, Nantes, Limoges, Lyon, etc. The "trade" went from father to son.

The book mentions also that Pinet made his first trip as convoyer by train in 1859. This faithful servant died on October 8, 1898.

And how did these birds look? Sylvain Wittouck, through his investigations as to the origin of the Belgian racing pigeon, wrote that the small crossed Pouters which were also called Smyters were used. They were described as "strong birds with feather on their legs".

Mr. Petrus Pittoors, a fine fancier of Bergerhout, caught the smart idea of crossing the Tumbler with the Liege short-beak, also called "Smerle" or "Luiksesnol" which had already earned a certain reputation as a racing pigeon. Actually the oldest racing pigeons were descendants of Smerles, Tumblers, Tipplers, English Carriers and Large Liege Snollen. Out of this mixture, in the course of a half century, the modern racing pigeon has been born.

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