

# Love of racing pigeons binds Actonians and the Royal Family

by Anne Redfeare

What do 30 Acton residents have in common with the Royal Family? Answer? They race pigeons.

What do a handful of racing pigeons have in common with Billy Bishop? They were decorated for bravery for flying during the war. In fact, one racing pigeon named Gibraltar, wounded by shrapnel near the front, flew 400 miles over water to deliver an important message which saved the lives of thousands of soldiers during World War II.

If you want to know a few more little-known facts about pigeons, ask Harry Foley, former president of Acton Racing Pigeon Club, or any of the club's 30 members who raise and race the specially-bred birds all over the province.

Foley began racing the birds in Great Britain in 1928. "My father had pigeons in 1921," Foley explained. "Then I got some of my own a few years later, and kept them until the war broke out." Britain's racing pigeons were commandeered by the armed forces during the war for carrying messages across enemy lines, Foley explained.

After the war he returned to his pigeon racing, but sold most of his birds to pay his fare to Canada in 1977.

He joined up with Acton Racing Pigeon Club, started in 1950s by Colin McColl, and began raising more birds over here. The club went dormant in the 1960s, but in 1974 it was brought back to life by another Acton area resident, George Kolozsvari. Now there are about 30 members in the Acton area, racing pigeons annually throughout Ontario and the United States.

As a hobby, the cost is minimal. Foley keeps 40 birds in his backyard coop, and pays about \$70 a year to feed them corn and mixed seed. Membership in the club is \$5 annually. Membership to the Canadian Union of Racing Pigeons

(pigeons, like postal workers, are unionized) is \$12 annually. Bands for the birds—all racing pigeons are banded with an identification number—cost a dime apiece. Race entry is 35 cents per bird, with a dollar kicked in toward the trophy.

The pigeons, he said, are easy to keep. "They're let out every couple of days, and they fly around the coop. But they don't go off and land on the streets," he added. "The pigeons you see hanging around streets and buildings aren't racing pigeons." The birds take several training flights each month during racing season, up to 40 miles from the home roost (as the crow flies). Training flights get the young birds used to travelling long distances in a basket, then flying long distances home again. Some pigeons go astray on the long flight, but if they don't arrive home, it is usually because they have fallen afoul of hawks, hunters, or hydro wires.

They fly fast. Race winners are judged by velocity, not by who gets home first. "On a 60-mile flight, my pigeon may arrive home an hour earlier than someone else's, but the other bird may be declared the winner because he had farther to fly," Foley explained.

The birds are issued special race bands before a race. When they arrive at the coop, they are captured and the band is removed and dropped inside a special clock, which prints the time of arrival to the second.

In a short race, the birds can fly more than a mile a minute. In longer races of up to 600 miles, the birds fly only during daylight hours

and rest up during the night. A racing day lasts from 5 a.m. to 8 p.m., and a bird who arrives at the coop at 8.30 p.m., a half-hour after the official closing time, is not clocked in until 8.30 the following morning, Foley said. "But a bird that will fly after sundown is a good racer."

Good racing pigeons, those who behave themselves and avoid the oven, can lead productive lives for eight or nine years, Foley said.

A winning racer, worth about \$20 about 25 years ago, might now sell for \$3,000. "They're getting pretty pricey, these pigeons. Some breeders ask \$300 for a young bird."

The average price, he said, is \$50 for two young birds. Foley, however, doesn't sell his birds often. "If I find a young person interested in racing, I'll give him some of mine to start with."

Pigeon racing won't get you rich, but some of the prizes are nothing to squawk about. The Hamilton Racing Pigeon Association's annual International long-distance race offers up to \$15,000 in prizes and cash. The race attracts entries from all over North America, Europe and even Japan.

It takes more than a good pigeon to win a race, Foley maintains. "It's about 60 per cent bird, 40 per cent owner. The owner has to see that the bird is healthy, well-trained, and in good racing condition. A person who sends five birds in good condition to a race is more likely to win than someone who sends 100 birds who aren't in condition."

## Two men injured in crash

Two men were taken to Milton District Hospital early last Wednesday morning after a single car crash near Rockwood.

William Watkins of 43 Greenore Cres., Acton, was southbound on Wellington County Road 50 (the Harris St. exten-

sion) about 3 a.m. when he failed to negotiate a curve, went into a ditch and struck a tree, according to Guelph OPP.

Police estimate \$4,000 in damage to the car. A passing motorist took Watkins and a passenger, Karry Thompson of Millside Dr., Milton, to hospital.

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Harry Foley and his grandson, Darren, admire one of the 40-odd racing pigeons kept in the coop behind their Acton home. Harry is one of 30 members of Acton's Racing Pigeon Club.

## Legion happenings

by Harry Norton  
Comrade E.G. Traversy C.D., Service Bureau Officer of the Royal Canadian Legion will be visiting the Branch on April 11. Anyone wanting information, advice or assistance regarding disability pensions, Treatment for entitled veterans, Application for benevolent funds or Appeals against adverse original applications for War Veterans and Widows allowances should contact our Branch Service Officer, Vic Patrick, by March 28 to make an appointment.

Branch 114, Oakville is hosting the Zone Billiards tournament on April 9. The deadline for registration is March 26. If you are interested in playing get your name on the list on the bulletin board or get in touch with Comrade Jim Hughes, the Zone B-7 Sports Officer.

Saturday March 26 should be a real fun evening at the Branch. Come on out and try and win some Easter goodies at the turkey roll in the auditorium. Chances to win Turkeys, hams, steaks or pork chops will be going on from 8 to 10 p.m. Tickets will also be sold on an Easter meat basket, \$1 each or three for \$2. The draw will be made at 11 p.m. the same evening. Kent Tocher will be providing the entertainment in the games room during the evening, so once you have made your lucky roll come on out and 'Roll with Kent'.

The regular monthly meeting of the Branch executive will be held on Monday, March 28. If you have anything of general interest for the Branch or a personal problem you would like discussed by your executive get in touch with President Jim Higgins or any other member of the executive before the meeting.

## Advance money to library board

The Eramosa Library Board received an advance payment on their 1983 levy. Eramosa township council approved the advance of \$2,500 because, as councillor John Galda explained, the board is desperately short of funds.

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