

Reminiscences and Fantail Fanciers

by Elisha Hanson

This special Fantail issue points up the necessity of a history of the Fantail Fancy in the United States. When Reed Kinzer asked me to write it, I was both honored and flabbergasted. I suddenly realized I had neither the knowledge or records nor the time to do a research job properly. When I declined, he came back with a request for a few reminiscences from my experience with Fantails and their Fanciers. These run back more than fifty years and the following is offered from memory and without the benefit of reference to records.

Having been reared in the Midwest, my first contact with Fantail fanciers was through the pigeon journals and by correspondence. Three men were my first correspondence contacts. They were the late Major Frank M. Gilbert and Fred Weiss of Evansville, Indiana, then a hot bed of the pigeon fancy in the mid-west and Gerald Champ now of San Diego but then a youngster in St. Joseph, Missouri. As an Assistant Secretary of the Illinois Valley Poultry and Pigeon Fanciers Association, I was given the job of getting up the pigeon show, Major Gilbert had been a great breeder, importer and exhibitor of Whites, Weiss a breeder and exhibitor of all colors and Champ, though I didn't realize it at the time, acquired a magnificent White cock which he showed and won with all over the Midwest. I wrote to all three.

Major Gilbert replied he had retired from showing but he would ask some of his friends to enter. At his request, Weiss made a magnificent entry - particularly of saddles. Champ exhibited the White cock -which he had named "Romulus" and Harry Matzke of Indianapolis entered a pair of Yellows which he had just imported. I can still see all those birds in my mind's eye.

While Major Gilbert made no entry, he was of inestimable help. He wrote that it was essential to get a good judge to have a good entry and he recommended George Ewald of Cincinnati for the job. That recommendation was like magic. We got an entry of such numbers everybody in

Peoria was flabbergasted. And right then and there I learned that however great one's love of pigeons might be and however beautiful the birds might be the greatest rewards of the fancy are to be found in the friendships made. It is a matter of deep satisfaction to me, that now, more than fifty years later, Gerald Champ is one of my closest friends in the fancy.

In 1914, having previously moved to Washington, D.C., I became a member of the Eastern Fantail Club. Its membership then embraced the greats of the fancy. Just think of some of the men, now alas gone. There were T.A. Havemeyer and his lost manager Jimmy Glasgow, Dr. F.H. Howland, Dr. F. D. Solley, W. J. Onink, Sandy Hay, Gilman E Hook, Jethrow Hathaway, Frank Hoyt, Byron Holmes, Dr. A. H. Harriman, William F. Turner, Nate Shaw, Walter Davis, Marcus Stahl and others whose names escape me now.

At my first Eastern Fantail Club Meet I learned the interest these men had in beginners. I had acquired some Fantails which had won a lot of ribbons for me in nearby shows. With all the confidence in the world, I entered ten of them at the New York. When the judging was over not a ribbon, not even a fifth was hung on any of my cages. The fanciers there went over my birds with me, pointed out where they had failed. I had seen that in the walking pen. Two of them, Dr's. Howland and Solley, agreed to help me get started. So, when I returned home, I sent every bird in my loft to the bird stores and waited for the Solley and Howlands birds to arrive to start over again.

I had tried to buy some birds from Mr Havemeyer and was shocked when he said he had none for sale. Two years later I learned why. As one of the rich men of America of the time he was not interested in the few dollars that he might pick up from selling surplus pigeons. He was interested in building up the fancy and assisting young fanciers whom he felt would stick. Thus, two years later, when I exhibited my

great Silver hen - the foundation of the American Silvers, he offered to buy her. My refusal to sell was the open sesame to his heart and his loft. It convinced him I would stick. So after that show he dropped me a note in which he said he and Jimmy had mated up their birds and had some fine ones they would not use. Therefore, if I would let him know what I needed he would send it along. I inquired the price of a pair of Blacks. No price was quoted; instead two pairs came along, together with some Whites and his compliments.

T. A. Havemeyer was one of the greatest breeders of the fancy ever known. Notwithstanding his vast business interests he spent Thursday of practically every week of the year at his lofts in Mahwah, New Jersey. He had an eye for type and colors both and ever was looking not only to improve his birds but those of other fanciers. Also in the horticultural field he was preeminent. For more than a quarter of a century he was the guiding spirit of the New York Horticultural Society with the great New York Flower Show each spring. He was one of the first, if not the very first, to introduce the hybrid French Lilacs to this country. Today he lies in his beautiful lilac garden at Glen Cove, Long Island. To the day of his death, even though he had been paralyzed for several years, he maintained his interest in the birds and supported the annual Fantail Club meets with his entries.

Dr. Howland, a dental surgeon, was an equally outstanding breeder. For years his Blues were unbeatable. Also, he was ever ready to help another fancier both with good stock and equally important with his fund of knowledge.

Dr. Solley actually had two periods as a fancier, first was when he was busily engaged in his practice in New York and then after an absence of several years, upon his retirement and his return to his ancestral home in Bethel, Connecticut. In the first period, he not only a keen judge and exhibitor but a battler for the adherence to the standard. He fought for proper leg setting, roundness of body and top tail and he produced birds approaching his standards. In that period he confined himself principally to

Whites. After his return to Bethel he wanted some of all colors and did not breed with the ruthless care he had previously shown.

One of the truly great breeders right after the turn of the century was William J. Onink of Buffalo. He had quit exhibitions shortly after the Buffalo Exposition but until the day of his death he maintained a stud second to none and a set of loft records superior to any I have ever seen. In his earlier days he had imported the very best he could obtain from England and he knew what to do with them after he got them. Let me illustrate.

Having fallen in love with Saddles when I first saw them I wanted some. But those in the early club shows I attended were poor on legs and in body. Then in 1917, I saw some of the right type in George E. Gray's loft in London. Subsequently, he sold all his birds in 1922. I obtained four from the man who got the Gray Red Saddles. In 1924 I lost the two important cocks. Mr. Onink heard of my loss, whereupon he wrote me he had two very good Red Saddle cocks bred down from Willie Stevenson's stock that I might be able to use. I jumped at his offer and when they reached me I was thrilled to find not only two outstanding birds but one better than any of the four I imported. It was so good I asked his permission to show it in his name at our next club meet. This he declined but raised no objection to my exhibiting it as the new owner. This I did and after the judging proudly wired him he bred the Red Saddle of the show.

Now a word about birds of those days and today. For my part, I think the overall quality of today is so far superior to the birds exhibited in the past there really is no comparison. Great as they were then, the famous Howland Blue hen "Iris," the great Solley White cock, the Havemeyer White "Jersey Jim", just to mention a few, could not, in my opinion, place a good Fantail show today. I will enter this caveat. I don't think the Saddles are as good as they were two decades ago and I still think we have a long way to go on Reds and Yellows. Particularly, is this true in the matter of color. Our younger enthusiasts will, I am sure, will take care of that problem before too long.