

Riverstone Pigeon Club

Compiled by Clarrie Neal from information provided by Judith Lewis, Jim Buchanan & Beryl Mills

It is believed the club was first formed in the early 1930s and some original members were - Jack Mills, Garnet Shepherd, Bruce Alcorn, Bert Hillier, Jeff 'Mutt' Haynes, Charlie Smith, Alec Goddard, and Billy Knott.

In 1936 the club merged with the Windsor club comprising Len Horsley (Pres), Rollie Hayes (Sec.), Don Winton, Ted 'Pop' Farey, and the brothers Bill and Bob O'Brien. In those days the railways were used to transport the pigeons to their race destinations and the club used the railway Parcels Office at Windsor for their meetings and to basket the birds.

After a short period and because the majority of members lived in Riverstone, their meetings and basketing were held in a room alongside the old Riverstone fire station. In 1939 a Mr Phippard joined the club from Pitt Town along with several members from Richmond including Ted Mills and 'Sniffy' Drayton, the club becoming known as the Hawkesbury District Pigeon Club. Another character who joined the club at this time was 'Snakey Joe' Waldron, who lived with the Hughes family near the trotting track in Riverstone.

Garnet Shepherd, being the club Secretary and Treasurer was the backbone of the club from the 1930s through to 1962. 'Mutt' Haynes, Max Alderton and Len Horsley all served as the club President during this period. For much of the period he was Secretary, Garnet made the back verandah of his home in George Street available for the club meetings and his garage for basketing the birds. Often helping Garnet with the bookwork and recording details at this time was his daughter Judith. Judith is currently the President of the Riverstone Historical Society.

The clocks used in those days were very basic and were known as 'Tin Lizzies', some were even home made. They were sensitive and had to be carefully handled once the timer had been activated.

Beryl Teale (nee Mills) recalled race days carrying her father's clock on her push bike to Garnet Shepherd's place, with strict instructions not to bump it. Holding the clock out in front she would ride the bike along Burfitt Street, then across the paddocks on tracks to Eastern Creek, where she would cross on two logs that formed a bridge. She would carry the clock across first, then return and carry the bike across and then continue on her way across the paddocks and the football field into Riverstone. Beryl has fond memories of this 'bridge' because it was built by her father, who also replaced the logs when washed away by floods.

With rail being the only form of travel in those days, the baskets of pigeons were placed on the train at Riverstone and taken to Granville and then transferred to the mail train heading west. In later years a truck was used to take the birds to either Blacktown or Penrith station for loading direct on to the mail train.

The bird baskets were placed in the guard's van with a bag of feed that was fed to the birds by the guard, who also filled their water tray. At their destination the birds were cared for by the stationmaster until he released them on race day.

The racing season usually extended from April through to October, with the short races being held early and the distances being gradually increased to the longer races at the end of the season. The club raced every Saturday, changing the location every 2 -3 weeks. On this western route the first race of the season was usually from Mt. Victoria, then Tarana, Blayney and later in the season they raced from Condobolin, Euabalong, Roto, Ivanhoe, Menindee and on occasions Broken Hill.

Depending on the distance to be travelled, members would take their birds to Garnet's place on a Wednesday, Thursday or Friday night, pay their race entry and pool fees and have their clocks sealed. Besides their registration ring the pigeons would have another small rubber ring placed on their leg, this ring being used to start the member's clock when the bird arrived home on race day. The pools were a form of sweepstakes, usually costing sixpence or a shilling to enter each bird, with the winner taking all.

With the retirement of Garnet Shepherd from pigeon racing in 1962, Grace Mills took over the position of secretary and held it throughout the 1970s. The 60s saw the position of president held by Bill Hawkes, then Neville McKellar with Jack Mills holding the position from the late 60s and throughout the 70s.

The Pigeon club held its meetings wherever they could find rooms suitable, some of the venues were the shed near the old fire station, Alec Goddard's garage in Brisbane Road, the room behind the Olympia theatre, and Wally Wood's old stables behind the shop that today is Charley Persaks Auto shop.

Largely through the efforts of Grace and Jack Mills, the club in 1968 gained approval from Blacktown Council to build their own clubrooms in Creek Street near the football ground. For all their years of service, both Grace and Jack were honoured with Life Membership of the Club.

The rooms were built entirely with voluntary labour, and the amenities are still enjoyed by the members today. Jack's son Alwyn prepared the concrete slab, Dave Whalan the brickwork, Bill Young the plumbing, and Kassa Skrobans with his building expertise supervised the other members who volunteered their services, including Gary Griffen, Herbie Spryn, Billy Hawkes, Red and Jimmy Buchanan, Sonny and Dennis Knott, Teddy and Johnny Dickinson.

With the new club rooms the club at the time had 42 members and became known as the Riverstone and District Homing Pigeon Society. Later, the formation of new clubs in the area at Richmond and Box Hill saw the membership drop to 17. The club had another change of name in the 1990s when it became the Riverstone Racing Pigeon Club Incorporated.

From the 80s to the 90s the president's position was held by Bob Solomons, Gary Evans, Carl Schnoor, Ron Beildermann, Red Buchanan, Jim Buchanan and Kevin Berrier. This period saw the Secretary's position held by Gary Griffin, Wayne Mitchell, and Jimmy Buchanan the present secretary who has served the club for more than 15 years.

In an area that extends from Concord to the Blue Mountains there are now 37 registered clubs that form the Central Cumberland Racing Pigeon Federation. The Federation uses its own semi trailer to transport the birds to their race starting points, all clubs taking their birds to Fairfield showground for loading on the trailer.

The change from rail to road transport in the 70s allowed the clubs more scope to choose their flight destinations and they can now fly south as far as Wonthaggi Victoria, and sometimes Launceston Tasmania.

- The West route now extends to Little Topar and Mingary in South Aust.
- The South-west route is to Mildura and Renmark in South Aust.
- The North-west route goes as far as Cunnamulla and Charleville in Qld.

The club in 2001 is flying the north coast route with races held from Newcastle, Buladelah, Old Bar, Kempsey, Coffs Harbour, Grafton, Ballina, Tweed Heads, Gympie and Bundaberg Qld. After flying this route sometimes at the end of the season the Federation holds an Invitation race from Rockhampton Qld., a distance of over 1,000 km by air.

Every Saturday during the racing season thousands of birds are released from the trailers to find their way home, over distances that vary from 60 km to 1200 km. The birds fly over mountains, deserts, and plains, through rain, snow, and wind, in temperatures that range from zero to 45 C.

Saturday is the usual race day but foul weather can cause the birds to be held over till the next day. Racing pigeons may average 30 km per hour against a headwind and will average over 60 km per hour with a tailwind. Storms and predator hawks can cause many birds not to make it home. A breeder who starts the season with 100 birds would normally expect to finish the season with 30 - 40 birds.

Race day sees the breeders anxiously scanning the sky for the first sign of birds, hoping to have a bird that will drop from the sky like a stone and go straight into the loft. Sometimes the birds on arriving home will fly several laps around the loft prior to landing, wasting valuable time and causing much frustration to the owner. At 7.00pm on race day the members all gather at their club rooms with their clocks to determine the winner and discuss the days results.

Club races today are worth \$120 to the winner, with \$80 and \$40 for the minor placings. Combined Federation races can be worth as much as \$4,000 to the winner.

Judith Lewis, daughter of Garnet Shepherd, shares these memories of the early days of the pigeon club: *My father, Garnet James Shepherd, was the inaugural Secretary of the Riverstone & District Homing Pigeon Society. This would have been in the early 1940s as I can clearly remember my parents talking about plans to form the Society.*

I believe the society was originally the Hawkesbury Homing Pigeon Society and the reason it moved to Riverstone was twofold. Firstly, most of the members were Riverstone men and, secondly, the group needed a shed where they could meet to prepare their birds for races, and we had a large shed on our spare block of land that was suitable.

I also recall my mother stating that the men would need to mind their language in front of my two brothers and I as she would not want us exposed to any swearing. I can honestly say I never heard any bad language from any of the 'Pigeon Men' as we called them.

My father built his pigeon loft across the back of our spare block. Against our back fence, alongside the shed, the width of the rest of our yard, was our chookyard. The pigeon pens, built of fibro with corrugated iron roof, were about 10 feet from the chookyard and must have been over 20 feet wide. There were three separate rooms about six feet square which had roosts for the birds. Between two of the three pens was the loft area from which the birds were released for flight.

Each Friday night the 'pigeon men' arrived with their birds for racing in small wicker baskets. The birds numbers were recorded, their racing rings were attached and they were put into large baskets to be taken to the railway station where they were loaded onto the train for transportation to the destination of their flight. The first race of each season was from Mt. Victoria and the later ones from as far afield as Broken Hill. Other destinations I recall were Tarana, Parkes, Menindee, Ivanhoe and Roto. One prestigious race was the Two Birder, from Roto, where each flier could only send two birds and both birds had to return home to be eligible for the prize.

On the Friday evening, after the men had taken the basketed birds to the railway, usually in Jack Mills' truck, they would meet on our back verandah. It was to our back verandah that the men would bring their pigeon clocks on race day. The clocks would have been started when the pigeon's racing ring was inserted into it. It was quite exciting waiting for the birds to come home and then waiting for the men to arrive with their clocks. My father made a blackboard on which he painted the name of each member and as they arrived with their clocks the details were recorded next to each man's name. It was my job during the week to work out the velocity of each bird. This was also written up on the board and all details were recorded in a large book.

There were only two men from Windsor, Mr Ted Farey, who came on the train each Friday night from his job at Marcus Clarke's store in the City. The other Windsor gentleman was Mr Len Horsley who managed Tancred's Tannery at Windsor. He was married to Mr Tancred's daughter. Mr Horsley would bring his and Mr Farey's birds down and take Mr Farey home after the meeting. My mother always had a cup of tea and ham and mustard sandwiches ready for Mr Farey's tea. After my mother died, in 1950, the task of Mr Farey's tea fell to me and he always complimented me on the sandwiches.

Other pigeon men included Alec Goddard, Jeff 'Mutt' Haynes, Jack Mills, Ernie Knott, Bruce Alcorn, Ian Marsh, Tommy Campbell, and later, Norbert Seget and Chris Spryn.

In the 1914-18 World War in Europe the carrier pigeons were the chief form of communication between the battlefields and base, and were used by both the Germans and the Allies. Even with the improvement in tele-communications in the 2nd World War, pigeons were still used extensively by both sides.

The Australians in New Guinea used them to overcome that country's poor lines of communication and transport. Because phone lines were vulnerable to damage and wireless messages were often intercepted, the use of pigeons minimised these disadvantages.

Pigeons were widely used in emergencies by landing barges and other craft to advise of their position and of problems, many crews refusing to leave port without their basket of birds. The efforts of the pigeon breeders and their Army trainers have been recognised in the Australian War Museum in Canberra.

Famous names who were pigeon fanciers include Clint Eastwood, Yul Brynner, Mike Tyson, cricket commentator Bill Lawrie, and the Royal Family.