



Research, Really!

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Quite a few pigeon people have told me stories over the past few years about reading some advertisements for a pigeon organization with an impressive-sounding name, sending in their dues, and getting virtually nothing of value in return — except a membership card and an occasional, dull bulletin. A few of these organizations made some outlandish claims, which made their club sound as though it was “God’s Gift to the Pigeon Fancy”. Usually, they cut as broad a swath as possible, trying to appeal to all segments of the populace. They used words like “Fancy”, “Flying”, “Sporting” (whatever that is supposed to mean in juxtaposition to the others — certainly not wagering, perish the thought), *and* — just when you thought the ad writer had run out of words — he slapped in “Research”!

Well, like any other naive reader, for two or three decades I used to let that one pass by without so much as a question. Somewhere, way back behind the scenes, I imagined there surely must be some earnest experimenters in white coats, doing their things for me. And if I would send my dues to one of these clubs, I would somehow become a beneficiary of their “research”. Now, I must conclude that, after having sent dues in to a number of clubs with grand names, there really was *no* “research” sponsored by any of them. Nowhere in any club bulletins did I ever find the slightest reference to the “research” it had advertised.

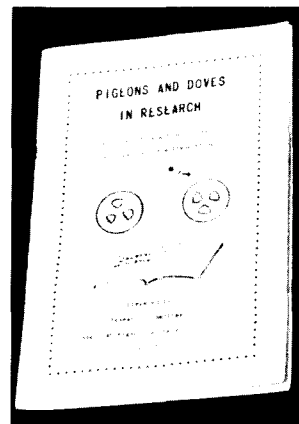
This is not to say that pigeons are strangers to research. Quite the opposite is true. It’s simply that pigeon *clubs* are strangers to research, almost by definition — regardless of the buzzwords they used to put in their ads. So much for the historical background.

Ten years ago, the germ of an idea came to the surface. It arose from the thought that there were a lot of pigeon clubs in this country — some large and some very small — but there was no “One Voice”. For that matter, there was no unifying effort. Quite to the contrary, at that time, each club was doing its thing, separately, and there was no movement to “get them all together”, to explore common interests, solve common problems, and confront common adversaries — or, at least, to communicate the joys of our hobby to the general public. At that time, Frank Hollmann, editor of the *American Pigeon Journal* and Thelma Snyder, editor of the *American Racing Pigeon News*, put their minds together. Some people have said that the original idea came from Wendell Levi. I don’t know about that, but I do know that in 1970 Hollmann and Snyder hired a meeting room in a first class hotel in St. Louis, persuaded the world’s largest manufacturer of animal feeds, Ralston Purina Co., to host a banquet, and “sweet-talked” fourteen experts on various aspects of the pigeon-keeping hobby/business to come to St. Louis at their own expense and take part in the program (which meant to give a talk). The first meeting was a real eye-opener for most of the people who attended. None of us who were there for the first meeting knew quite what to expect. Each of us saw a few familiar faces in the crowd, but to most, the rest were strangers. Still, when the two days were finished, we all decided it had been a very worthwhile experience, and we definitely should do it again the following year. Furthermore, it was decided that this should not be just another pigeon club — in other words, this should not be regarded as something in competition with any existing pigeon

organizations. Rather, it should be regarded as a kind of “umbrella” under which *all* could come together. It decided to ask all pigeon clubs to contribute to the general cause five cents for each of their members, and it decided on a name, “American Pigeon Fanciers’ Council”.

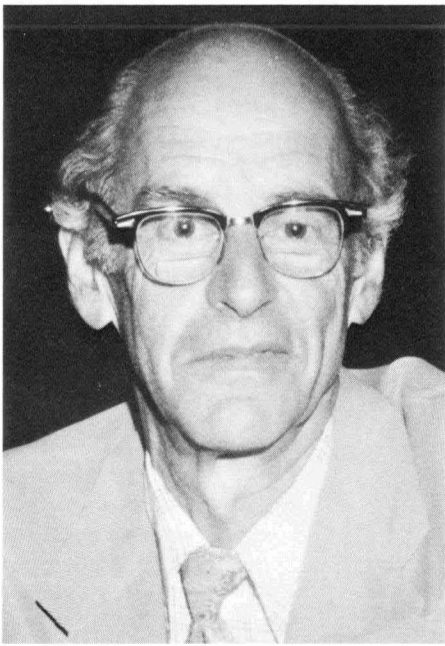
Along the way, it identified five clear objectives. Stated briefly, they are: (1) to support a pigeon museum and library; (2) to sponsor research with pigeons; (3) to foster cooperation among the different pigeon organizations; (4) to encourage greater activity by the young with pigeons; and (5) to hold a conference every year at which these topics are discussed. That is what the American Pigeon Fanciers’ Council is all about. Easy to say, but difficult to achieve. There is probably not a pigeon breeder in the world who would not be 100% in favor of every point stated. The problem is, of course, how to make progress on any one of them — without a formal organization, without political clout, without paid staff, and without more than one get-together a year.

Still, with all these obstacles, it is commendable that some definite headway has been made toward many of these objectives — not with measured steps every year, but — here and there during the past ten years. My present purpose is to show the evidence of progress in the area of research (without quote marks around the word).



The booklet, “Pigeons and Doves in Research,” by Hollander, Hanebrink and Skinner represents the first efforts of breeders to get acquainted with the activities of the scientific world as it pertains to their particular birds. The work was funded by the American Pigeon Fanciers’ Council.

What the APFC has done in the area of research has been — not so much in actually “sponsoring” it, but — in bringing existing research to light. And surely, this is a reasonable first step. The Council learned in its early years that there was a surprising amount of research being



Dr. Willard F. Hollander, Professor Emeritus of Genetics at Iowa State University, engaging in an informal discussion at the July, 1979, American Pigeon Fanciers' Council meeting in St. Louis. He is the senior author of "Pigeons and Doves in Research."

done, year-to-year in the field of genetics by dozens — perhaps hundreds — of amateur pigeon breeders in America, and that many of these breeders were reporting their data informally to one or two of the pure-science zealots in that field of knowledge. (More about that in a later report.) It also learned that a considerable amount of research had been done in the field of nutrition by Ralston Purina Company, and it has had a speaker from that company at every conference from the beginning — real, solid information on what pigeons need — not "canned" sales talks. Similarly, it learned that quite a few Doctors of Veterinary Medicine had studied a number of the more common diseases which affect pigeons, and several presentations on these were made to the assembled breeders over the past ten conferences. In addition, some constructive discussions were led by laymen, with professional style.

What pigeon person has not asked himself the age-old question: what makes Homers (Racing Pigeons) fly home? People who attended the APFC seminars over the past ten years have seen "First Showings" of the discoveries made by the scientists at Cornell University's Department of Neurobiology and Behavior, which later appeared in *National Geographic*, *Smithsonian*, *Scientific American*, and other scientific journals. Those who saw all four of the "First Showings" from Cornell should be able

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to answer a lot of questions about what makes Homers fly home — *without* a lot of baseless folk-lore, but — *with* reliable scientific information, the outcome of real research. Actual 20th Century science. The straight stuff, specially prepared for pigeon breeders. First at the APFC seminars. No strings attached! Fantastic! (More on that at another time, too.)

In the first ten conferences there were 70 different people who came to the meetings and appeared as speakers on the programs. Of these 70, 22 had (or have now) the title "Doctor" in their names. Most are Ph.D's. By 1976 there was a clear movement afoot: the pigeon breeders in attendance wanted to know, "How can we help with research? What can we do that will benefit the birds and the people who keep them?" After some consideration it was decided that, before jumping in and throwing money around in all directions, the first thing to do was to find out exactly what was going on in research with pigeons already. A committee was appointed, consisting of three men who were very close to the field, and they were asked to make a report on their findings. Those appointed were: Dr. E.L. Hanebrink, Arkansas State University; Dr. W.F. Hollander, Iowa State University; and Dr. J.L. Skinner, University of Wisconsin-Madison. Dr. Skinner was named Chairman. Their report, titled "PIGEONS AND DOVES IN RESEARCH", was published in 1977. The foreword states that it is "an attempt to identify the scope, location and direction of current research involving pigeons and doves." Though modest in size (20 pages, 5-1/2" x 8-1/2"), this booklet contains a wealth of "eye-openers" for those interested in the subject — as well as a few "did-you-knows" for those who are not.

Fortunately, the writers had a considerable "arsenal" of resources available for their use. The Smithsonian Science Information Exchange made a computer print-out of all work published in the USA in the past few years where the words "pigeon" or "dove" (or the Latin names of these) appeared in the titles. Then the Iowa State librarians went to work to find similar titles in scientific papers published outside the USA. With the admission that many pieces of research worthy of notice probably were not "caught" by this process — such projects as tests on drugs and feeds, done by companies which do not publish their information for the benefit of the general public —

still about 750 reports were assembled! Now, this does not mean from the start of time. It means just during the past few years. Scientific information retrieval services only keep their current titles for a limited period of time; then they flush them out, to make room for all the new studies. Now, consider that little fact for a moment: the world of science used pigeons in at least 750 experiments during a short period of time. One has to ask: how many pigeon fanciers were aware that research on this scale was going on? Surely, very few!

It is not the purpose of this article to review or summarize this booklet. However, it is timely to bring it to light and to point to some of its high spots. The writers did not provide us with a catalog listing of all their findings; rather, they "boiled down" the areas where pigeons were used in research of 16 arbitrary topics of interest. These are listed below with a few words of explanation.

1. Psychology — Behavior (20% of total) using Skinner boxes, etc.*
2. Navigation, 20 reports, including the prominent work with Homers at Cornell.
3. Neurology (12% of total) studies of the brain, nerve fibers, vision.
4. Endocrinology (10% of total) tracing hormones, using radioactivity.
5. Biochemistry (15% of total) enzymes' actions on organs, energy.
6. Artherosclerosis (5% of total) cholesterol in old white Carneaux.
7. Pharmacology & Physiology (7% of total) effects of drugs on various organs.
8. Nutrition, relatively few papers, a sad contract to 40 years ago.
9. Toxicology (3% of total) surprising sparcity, considering its importance.
10. Genetics (pigeons are a relatively unpopular animal with researchers today), mosaics, etc.
11. Veterinary (10% of total) Herpes virus, pox, worms, fungi, etc.
12. Parasitology (3% of total) malaria, a Brazilian fluke, and Indian tapeworm.
13. Human Disease, 20 reports, "Pigeon Breeder's Lung" got most attention.
14. Anatomy (5% of total) eyes, ears, arteries, the pancreas and testis.
15. "Domestic" pigeon studies: squab production, fancy breed care, etc.
16. "Wildlife", general taxonomy, ecology, control of street pigeons. (*The phrase "Skinner box" comes

up frequently in the report. This refers to the invention of B.F. Skinner at Harvard, not J.L. Skinner at Wisconsin.)

While it is obvious that pigeons are definitely well used in the scientific laboratories around the world, the writers point out that "practically none of the research has been undertaken at the instigation of pigeon or dove breeders for *their* benefit." Still, all this information is available to the fanciers who have the desire to go after it. Having a university library nearby is helpful. If one is particularly curious about a subject, he may try to contact the researchers themselves or the writers of this report, and with any such inquiries a stamped return envelope is suggested. Many times, mutual benefits result. The fancier learns about the research, while the researcher learns many things about pigeons and doves which *he* never knew before!

Doctors Hanebrink, Hollander and Skinner should be proud of what they have delivered to their fellow pigeon fanciers. "PIGEONS AND DOVES IN RESEARCH" is an important step in the area of communications between the world of science and the world of bird keepers. Surely, nothing in it is so momentous that it will change the lives of either group. However, that's not the point. The point is that three dedicated pigeon fanciers, who happen to be a part of the world of science, thought enough of the idea to show the rest of us what is happening in *their* world with pigeons and doves. And henceforth, before a pigeon writer (in a club ad or otherwise) used the word "research", he ought to be informed of the extent to which these birds *are* involved in research — really!

Copies of the report are available at \$1.00 each from: Dr. John L. Skinner, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1675 Observatory Drive, Madison, Wisconsin, 53706. The dollar covers the cost of printing. The costs of the computer print-out from the Smithsonian and the foreign abstracts from the Iowa State library were paid for by the American Pigeon Fanciers' Council. The many hours of work necessary to produce the report were contributed by the writers as a voluntary service.

On behalf of the many thousands (millions?) of bird fanciers around the world it is my pleasant duty to say, "Thank you, gentlemen. You have taken the vital, first step, admirably and with style. You have given us all a new perspective on our birds."•