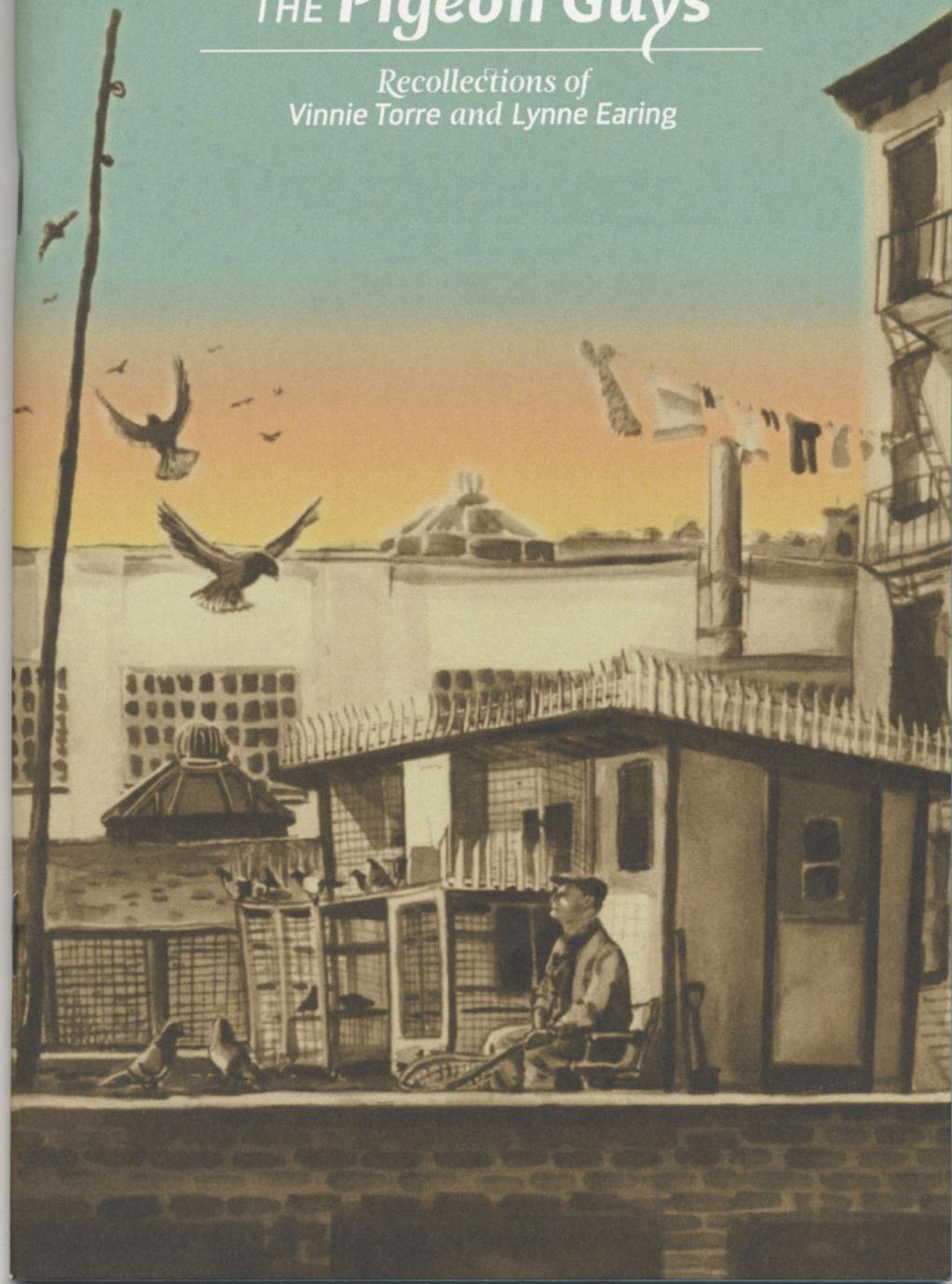
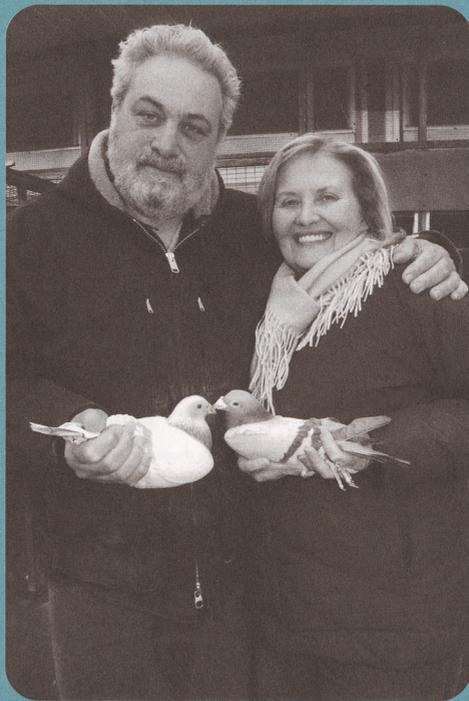


THE PIGEON GUYS

Recollections of
Vinnie Torre and Lynne Earing





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Vinnie Torre and Lynne Earing

A chapbook from the "Vanishing Hoboken" series
of the Hoboken Oral History Project



Vanishing Hoboken -
The Hoboken Oral History Project

A Project of The Hoboken Historical Museum
and the Friends of the Hoboken Public Library

This oral history chapbook was made possible
with support from John Wiley & Sons, Inc., and the
Hudson County Pigeon Club, Hoboken, NJ.



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COVER: Frankie "County Loft" Casella, 1st and
Jackson Streets, Hoboken, circa 1980s.
Unless otherwise noted, all photos are courtesy
of Vinnie Torre.



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—VINNIE TORRE
March 10, 2009

INTRODUCTION

VINNIE TORRE, THE YOUNGEST OF ELEVEN CHILDREN, lives in the same Hoboken home his father took apart in the 1950s and had trucked from Jackson Street to Monroe Street. And for almost as many years, the roof of this two-story house has also been home to racing pigeons, sleek and powerful flyers totally unlike the much-maligned street pigeons that Vinnie calls “clinkers.” The birds roosting in “Hillside Loft” have been bred and trained to be champion flyers, in keeping with the teachings of Vinnie’s Hoboken mentors.

Italian immigrants introduced pigeon flying to Hoboken in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. By the mid-1950s, some of the sons and grandsons of those flyers were passing along their skills, and occasionally their birds, to Vinnie. He couldn’t have known it then, but he was learning the flyer’s art during the sport’s last strong years in a city that had once boasted hundreds of rooftop lofts.

Pigeon lofts remained plentiful in Hoboken through the late 60s, but in 1968, when urban renewal efforts brought the leveling of buildings on lower Hudson and River Streets to make way for the construction of the Marine View towers, many flyers lost their coops. By the 1990s, declining interest in the sport, diminished tolerance for bird-raising in a close urban setting, and the death or relocation of most of the city’s flyers caused Hoboken’s longstanding Hudson County Pigeon Club on Newark Street to cease operations. (In 2008, Vinnie would spearhead its revival.)



During the local club’s dormant years, Vinnie continued to raise and to train birds at his “Hillside Loft,” and to enter and win races state- and nationwide. He earned his living through the ownership of a local junkyard, body shop, and used-car lot, but his energy and passion went into his birds and racing. In the late 1990s, he met Lynne Earing, a Bayonne animal lover who was soon sharing his life and his enthusiasm for the sport. It did not take long for Vinnie to add a smaller coop, “Lynne’s Loft,” to the Monroe Street rooftop.

Lisa Sartori interviewed Vinnie Torre and Lynne Earing on Vinnie’s roof, on March 10, 2009. The transcript of their interview, from which this chapbook is derived, has been deposited in the collections of the Hoboken Public Library and the Hoboken Historical Museum.

ABOVE: At Vinnie Torre’s “Hillside Loft,” Monroe Street, Hoboken, NJ, 1970s. (Left to right) Vinnie Torre, “Mike the Cop,” and Willie Nelson, “one of the best ever in the pigeon game.”

When the Sparks Started

Vinnie Torre: [How did I get interested in pigeon flying?] When I was real young, maybe about nine-ten years old, there was this guy Frankie Luongo, who owned the grocery store around Jackson Street. I used to eat breakfast right here, on my kitchen table, and I used to see [his] birds flying around his coop. That's what really got me interested. It always amazed me, how they were flying around. That's when the sparks started.

[So then] me and this friend of mine, this kid, Kenny "Brushie," we were like partners. We saved our pennies, and we went to Neal's store, a pigeon store on Grand Street. We went and bought a bird or two. We used to buy like fifteen cents worth of feed at a time. That's how young we were.



Then we got some more birds. And then I needed *more*, so I got my sister's hope chest. My mother was putting stuff away for her—like blankets, and doilies, and stuff—in [a] red cedar hope chest. I tore all the things out, and I brought that up on the roof, cut a hole in it, and put a chicken crate there! We had a lot more birds then. That was the first time we got eggs.

[But] oh, my sister! When she found that out, boy, I got beat! Oh, did I get beat! [Laughs] She was my older sister and she was tough.

But that didn't mean anything. After the beating, we had to get another coop. So we went and got some orange boxes, and we made a crate. That started our pigeons—me and Kenny "Brushie." Ever since then, [I've] had pigeons.

Two Mentors

Vinnie: Frankie Luongo and this guy, "Funsy"—were my two mentors. [Funsy] lived right on top of the hill. [His loft was called "Model Loft" and Frankie's was "F. Luongo Loft"] Those two guys—they really knew pigeons.

The first time I ever flew pigeons and saw birds come home was with Frankie Luongo. I started over [at Frankie's] in maybe '55. I was a kid. I went over there and stole some of his birds! He just looked over, and he seen the coop. He came walking over, he confronted me, and he said, "I'll give you some birds." After we made friends—he yelled at me and

gave me a couple slaps in the back of the head—he gave me a job in his store. I was cutting cold cuts and taking care of his pigeons. He used to take me to the clubs—the Ideal Club in Jersey City (that’s gone), and [to the one] in Hoboken. We used to go there every night to train pigeons. I’m talking ’55-’56-’57.



HUDSON COUNTY
HOMING PIGEON CLUB, INC.

358 NEWARK STREET
Hoboken, N. J.

THIS IS TO CERTIFY THAT

M _____

is a member of the Club

195 _____

The Hudson County Pigeon Club



Vinnie: [In those days, Hoboken’s Hudson County Pigeon Club was really active.] There were like sixty-five in the club. I’d say thirty-five [of them were from Hoboken. Now] I’m trying to keep that club alive.

It’s from 1922, that club—[when it was formally organized.] There was a president, there was a secretary, there was a treasury, there was a vice-president, there was a bouncing. Everybody had their own little jobs. [And before you could become] a member of that club, you had to be a pigeon flyer. [Even now,] you can’t be a social member. In the by-laws there’s a rule that you have to be a pigeon flyer to be a member of the club.

[The club was originally] over a chicken store, right over there by Dunkin Donuts [on Newark Street], in that little mall. That’s where it started. Then they got a little money together, and there was a bunch of [old-timers]—Mikey Verta, Freddie Baccardo, and some [others]—after the [Second World] War, they built the club [where it is now.]

I used to hang out there [with a whole group of pigeon flyers.] There was Sonny Cack, “Tonto,” “Mike the Cop,” Eddie Bebblo, and “The Club Charlie.” There was “Fat Charlie,” Charlie Gramano, “Cardboard Shoes,”

LEFT TOP: Johnny “Crown” Baginski of the Hudson County Pigeon Club, Hoboken, 2009. Photo: Robert Foster. LEFT BOTTOM: Hudson County Pigeon Club (Hoboken, NJ), membership card, ca. 1950.

“Charlie Bananas,” and “Ziggy.” [We all had nicknames.] My name, when I was a kid, was Vinnie Barbieri. And you know why it was Vinnie Barbieri? Because my father, downstairs, owned the barbershop, and *barbieri* means barber. I was Vinnie the Barber’s Kid, so they called me “Vinnie Barbieri.” That was my nickname. [And now that my loft name is “Hillside,” they call me “Vinnie Hillside.”]

[But for a while, back then, I was also] “Vinnie the Kid.” I used to go down to the club—and I’m talking now, maybe I’m 15-16 years old—every night. I’m talking *every* night. We used to be down there until 1:00-2:00 in the morning, sitting outside, talking, bragging, playing cards. [And] Sonny Cack [and] Red Handel used to send me to go get “triple-deckers.” There used to be a Chinese store, at First and Washington, that would sell egg sandwiches—three deckers. They used to send me there for coffee and they used to send me to go get the egg sandwiches, then send me for coffee. I was the gofer. I didn’t have a car, I used to run. It was really fun.

[What did my family think?] Well, it kept me out of trouble. Because I was really—well, in trouble! They used to ship me off, when I was a kid, to stay out of trouble. They used to ship me off to relatives in the country for the whole summer, just to keep me safe. [Laughs.] People-safe.

That’s what I think kept me on the straight-and-narrow—the pigeons. And I always hung out with older people. The pigeon guys were always way older than I was, and they steered me in the right direction. It was all about fun and kidding. Every night there was something going on, and all the stories! Oh! Thousands and thousands of stories that people had—of their lives and stuff. [My favorites were when they talked about] the races. They talked about how they lost the race by two seconds. The bird hit the house. The bird swung. The birds came up this street, they came up that street. Oh! You had to be there, and you had to be involved with the birds. It’s kind of great, I’ll tell you the truth.



At Vinnie Torre’s “Hillside Loft,” Monroe Street, Hoboken, NJ, 1970s. (Left to right): Jimmy Wachter, Vinnie Torre, Nicky Pino and Louie Cosmanic.

HILLSIDE LOFT



Home of
Champions



From Tiplets to Homers

Vinnie: [When I was really young,] we raced the tiplets. Fancy birds. [Tiplets are] all different shapes and colors and they really don't fly any kind of distance. Homers have got pedigrees, they've got instincts to come home.

I started racing [homing] pigeons at sixteen years old. I'm going to be sixty-two. So it was in the '60s, I guess, when I first started—'68-'69.

I worked for my brother, Bob, [to have money for my birds.] Bob had a coat factory in Hoboken on Fourth and Jefferson Streets. He had 70-80 people working for him. I used to go get coffee, two times a day—in the morning and at night—[and] then I used to clean the factory, clean all the machines. I used to charge fifty cents a container of coffee, and I used to make a quarter on each coffee. So I used to make \$8-10 a day, each time. That's how I flew pigeons.

I think I won my first race in '69. It was a 100-mile race and there were only eleven people in it, but I won my first race. I didn't care. I know the number. The bird number was Hudson County #67. It was a seven-hour, 150-mile race. I had to go to Metuchen. They made fun of me—"Oh, it was only eleven lofts"—I didn't care! I won my race. I've won over 400 races, 400 first-places I've had so far in my life, I betcha. I'm pretty good at it.

Birds From Belgium

Vinnie: [What kinds of pigeons did I have to start?] I had Frankie Luongo's Bastines. There were Delmonts, Wegies, Gruders. There aren't too much of them anymore, but the Sions are still around. [And] from years and years ago—I've got them [almost forty] years—the Haveniths. They still do very well. It's the same family.

[The birds have] different bloodlines. They're all strains of the Rock Dove. [And guys with names like] Sion, Jansen, Havenith—when [their birds were successful, their names were attached to that line.]

[Frankie got his birds] from Belgium [and from Holland.] There were a lot of Belgians that used to be in [the] Paterson embroidery companies. The Belgians were big in that. They brought a lot of the birds over from Belgium.



Walter “Red” Handel

Vinnie: In '59 [Frankie Luongo] wound up passing. [The guy who bought Frankie's birds was] this guy Red Handel, from Jersey City. I [wound] up being his partner, and did very well up until '63. But then he moved to Woodbridge, in like '64-'65. He flew down there with his father, Chick Handel.

Walter “Red” Handel was a driver for Ballantine. He was single all his life. He had a sister, Bertha, that was out of this world. She was a sweetheart. [And] Red was a pretty nice guy. When I was a kid, sixteen years old, he used to give me money to ship races. He'd already moved to Woodbridge, and he used to come down and give me money. He gave me the clocks, he gave me the crates. He really took care of me.

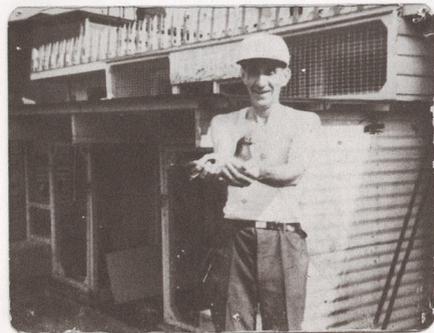


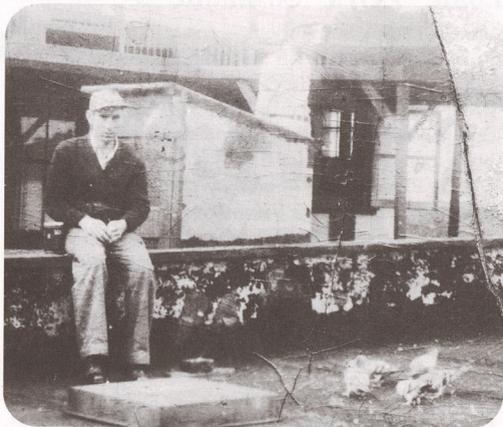
ABOVE: At the Hudson County Pigeon Club, Hoboken, 1970s. (Left to right): Mike from “Diane C Loft” on Staten Island, Walter “Red” Handel, and Joe Camis. RIGHT: Louie “Zeres” Cosmanic at Vinnie Torre’s “Hillside Loft,” Monroe Street, Hoboken, NJ, 1970s.

Louie “Zeres” Cosmanic

Vinnie: Louie Cosmanic—that was a partner of mine, too, [after Red left Hoboken.] This guy ran the city. He was in charge of public works. [He'd been] partners with Mike the Cop, [but that partnership ended.] They didn't have birds anymore, because they had to get off the roof on River Street [when they put in the new buildings,] the Marine Views. That whole block, they had to get rid of, and that's how we wound up [being partners—me and] Louie “Zeres.”

[Louie] never married. He had a girl friend for thirty-five years. (She's still alive; I see her. She still lives in Hoboken, in the projects.) The deal was that I had to buy him two cigars, a cup of tea and an order of toast, every day over in Skinny's, over there where Chickie's is. (That little restaurant on Madison Street? That used to be Skinny's.)





Louie came and took care of the street cleaners, right? [Then] he came here. He took care of the birds, cleaned everything, did everything, then he [left.] He came back at 5:00, cleaned again, took care of everything. I used to take him home about 7:00 or 8:00. He was the best. I didn't have to do nothing!

[We were partners] fifteen years. I loved him like a father, that guy. [Around 1985, he had a stroke and] never came out of the hospital. They fly right to the end, these guys.

ABOVE: Louie "Zeres" Cosmanic's "Riverview Loft," River and First Street, Hoboken, NJ, early 1950s. RIGHT: Lynne Earing and one of her birds, 2009. Photo: Robert Foster.



How Lynne Became a Pigeon Flyer

[Lynne Earing joins the conversation.]

Lynne Earing: [How did I get involved in all this?]

I got fixed up on a blind date like ten years ago, by a pigeon flyer I knew from Bayonne, John de Sena. He fixed me up with Vinnie on this blind date. I said, "Well, it's a night out." And Vinnie, I guess, said the same thing. We had a nice time. Then he called me up a couple days later. The following Friday night we went out. After that, we've been together every single day, just about, for the past ten years. It was ten years on February 6th, that we've been together.

He had told me, right up front, he said: "I do pigeons. If you want to hang out with me, you're going to have to accept this." So I said, "Okay." Little did I know! (This was February; it's not racing season, so nothing's going on.)

Vinnie would take me into the coop, when we first started out. I didn't even know the different colors. He would hold the bird up and he'd say,



“What color is this?” [He’d show me the difference.] He’d say, “This is a Blue Checker, and this is a Blue Bar.” Now, of course, there are other colors. But he would quiz me until I learned that. If I wanted to talk to him I could go into the coop and talk to him—because that’s where he was most of the time.

So now April comes, and the first races start. I would ride with him to the clubs, and I would sit outside in the car. He’d bring the birds in to ship, he’d come out, and we’d leave. After a while he’d say, “Come in with me,” so then I’d go in and I’d sort of hang out.

You have the club races, but you also have special races at each club in the combine. Each club runs special races. Well, as the season goes



ABOVE: Jimmy “Jefferson” Corson, Johnny “Crown” Baginski, Vinnie “Hillside” Torre, at the Hudson County Pigeon Club, Hoboken, 2009. Photo: Robert Foster.

on, you’re not just doing club races; you’re doing band races. [With band races, anybody in the tri-state area can enter, and they have big prizes.] So it’s not just one night a week that you’re going, shipping birds. You’re shipping Thursday, Friday, Saturday, sometimes in between. So now, three or four nights a week, you’re going to these clubs.

I started going to the Lyndhurst Club [with Vinnie; he’s the president of that club now.] I’m really an animal lover, so instead of me sitting there, doing nothing, I said, “Well, can I do something?” I started counter-marking the birds. It’s a rubber band that they would put on [the bird’s] leg, to identify that bird for that race. There was a little machine that opened the rubber band up, you put the bird’s leg in it, closed it, and the band was on. Then, when [the bird comes] home from the race, you’ve got to get that rubber band off, stick it in the clock, [and] turn the handle: that’s how you clock the bird. So I started doing that.

Vinnie: That punches the time, the arrival of the bird, right to the second. A thousandth of a second.

Lynne: [Most flyers don’t use that method any more.] Now the [birds] have an electronic chip on their legs. That electronic chip means you don’t have to counter-mark. When the bird comes home, there’s a pad they call an antenna. The bird goes over [it], and that electronic chip automatically clocks.

[But when I first started out, I was counter-marking.] Then I retired [from my job.] Vinnie used to bring his birds to a training truck in

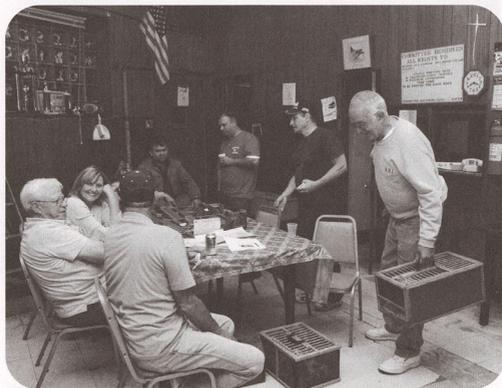


Lyndhurst, and I said, “You know what, Vinnie? I’ll come in the morning. I live in Bayonne. I’ll come in the morning, and I’ll bring the birds to Lyndhurst for you.” Because he had to clean the coops, feed [the birds], and get the water ready. I said, “I’ll do that.”

I would come every morning, during training season, to drive the birds. Then, after a while, the man who had the training truck passed away.

(A training truck has little cages in the back.) I had been retired about a year, and I was starting to get a little antsy, like, “This is ridiculous. I’m sitting here doing nothing!” So Vinnie said, “Why don’t you take the training truck?” I said, “I don’t know.” He said, “You can do it.”

He took me the first day, drove me out to Washington Township [and] showed me what to do. The next day he said, “You’re on your own.”



So then I started training the birds, [and] not just his birds—other people’s birds, [too.]

Some people will give me their birds, [and I’ll] take them fifty miles away, and I release them. This is how they train, and they build up their stamina. Usually, the next day, [the owners will] ask me [for information.] I keep track of when I let so-and-so’s birds go. They’ll ask, and they know how long it should take that [group of birds] to get home. They’ll take into account the weather, the wind, and they’ll know within a minute or two—

Vinnie:—if they’re doing good time.

Lynne: If they’re falling off for some reason, then they know they might have a problem. Then they’ll look at that.



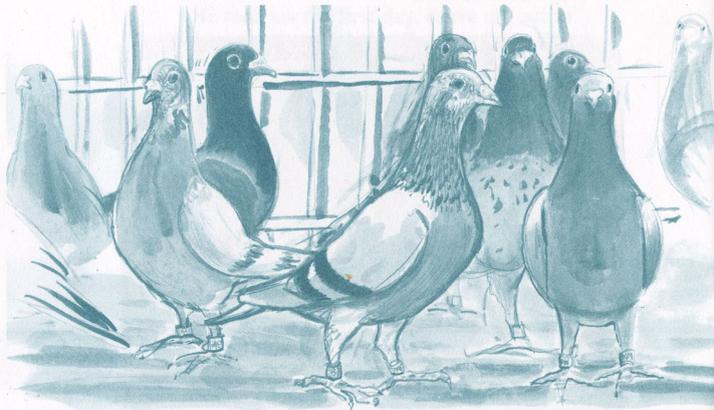
LEFT: Pigeon racers for the Hoboken Derby, shipping night, Hudson County Pigeon Club, 2009. Photo: Robert Foster. ABOVE: Training Pigeons at Exit 9 on the New Jersey Turnpike, New Brunswick, 1970s. (Left to right) Bobby “Suggestion” of Staten Island, “Mike the Cop.”

“Lynne’s Loft”

Lynne: Then [Vinnie] said, “You know what? I’m going to make you a little coop. I’ll give you some birds to start.”

Vinnie: I keep asking that question. I keep saying, “Ten years ago, did you imagine doing all this?” [Laughs.]

Lynne: Last year, in 2007, [I was] the Hall of Fame winner for the United States. [Laughs.] Not only first but second place! Vinnie breeds the birds. [And] it was one of Vinnie’s birds that was first place.



Breeding

Vinnie: [Breeder birds don’t fly any more. They’re retired racers.] Once they go into breeding, that’s the end of it. You just use them for breeding. You have a separate coop for them. One’s a racing coop, and one’s a breeding coop.

[When I breed birds, I keep track of bloodlines.] Pedigrees go back a hundred years. [I breed them based on] the family. If there’s a champion bird in my coop, I can make the bloodline go three-quarters or seven-eighths. That’s the closest you can get—seven-eighths of that bird. [And] some birds, they’ll race but they won’t breed. I’ve been fortunate. The ones that race and the ones that do breed—they’re good breeders and good racers.

Lynne: So if he had a Havenith, he would try to put it with a Havenith, to keep the line, to keep that family together.

Vinnie: But a little different. You can actually breed father and daughter, and you’d never get them to come with three legs or anything like that. But if you raised six, you might get one that’s pretty good. I think that’s too close. Half-brother/half-sister, uncle and niece. That’s the way I breed. They call that line breeding.

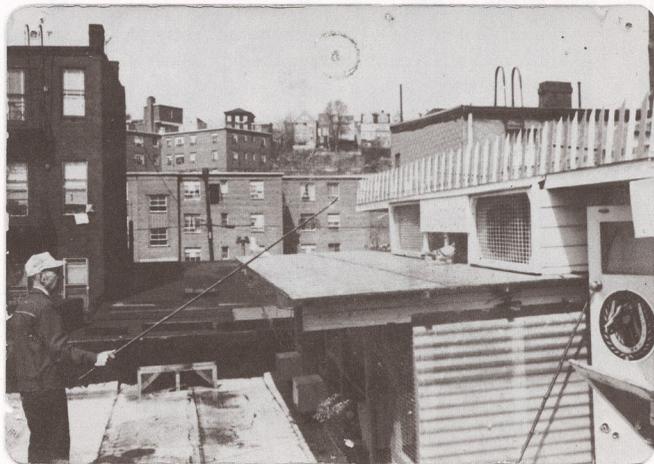
Lynne: There are short races, there are sprints, and then there are the long races, so [some people, when they’re] breeding [birds, they] want to think about that. “Okay, I want to get a good bird for the long-distance races,” so [I’ll] put two

birds together that had good results in long-distance flying. [Vinnie] doesn't do that, but other people do.

[Then, when they hatch,] some you give away. [Vinnie] gives away a lot of birds. A lot of people sell birds. There's a lot of guys who are flyers who sell pigeons, but Vinnie's a softie.

Vinnie: They call me Santa Claus.

Lynne: He gives away a lot of birds. Right now we have a kid who just sort of showed up at our club in Lyndhurst, a young boy in college, and Vinnie's been over there building him a little coop like I have, and now he'll be getting birds.



Why Do They Come Home?

Lynne: Homing pigeons have [something like] antennas, in their brains. [And that antenna] is floating [in a kind of] oil. After [they're] six weeks old, that oil turns to [a kind of] cement, and locks them into where their home is. That's why we can get pigeons from other people, when they're young enough, [or give some baby birds from here to other people.]

Vinnie: Before [they're] four weeks old.

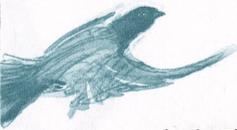
Lynne: Then they would be able to home into this coop [or to the new coop if we gave some away.] But after they get to be a certain age, you can't do that.

The pigeons [we've] raised here, when they first go out, they're really too young to fly away. They really don't have the strength to get up. [First they have to get] used to this house, that platform, and their coop. Then after a while they're able to start flying a little bit, and they'll fly around the house for a long time.

Vinnie: Well, for a month, a month and a half. Then I would take them half a mile. People take them further, but I go a little at a time. It'll take me a week and a half to go five miles, but once I get them past five miles....

Lynne: We usually take them to the end of the Jersey City/Hoboken line—the first toss. We let them out. Because already, from here, they've already flown around enough that they're familiar, you know?

OPPOSITE: Louie "Zeres" Cosmanic with walking cane at "Hillside Loft," Hoboken, NJ, 1970s.



Vinnie: They call that “routing.” When they route, they actually learn the area.

Lynne: From here.

Vinnie: From the coop.

Lynne: We’ll do that a couple days, then we may move them five more miles. As soon as they seem to be comfortable with that, then we move them again. Eventually, when they go on the truck, they’re already ready. They could really fly a hundred miles, but the first toss after that is like fifty. Once they can do that, then they can really do just about anything.

Vinnie: The key is, to get birds to come home, you’ve got to motivate them. Any way that’s possible—eggs; hide their girlfriend; hide their boyfriend; babies. Anything. Play with them, hide them today, then let them see them tomorrow. Ten minutes today, fifteen minutes tomorrow, twenty minutes the next day, then don’t let them see them. Then, all of a sudden, give them another five minutes.

[With the baby birds, when they’re first starting out,] they’re learning they’ve got wings. [They don’t even try to escape, except] when a cat comes up, or a hawk. I just lost a bunch—eight—from a hawk.

Lynne: They’re so young. They got terrified by that hawk —

Vinnie: They just keep flying.

Lynne:—and being that they’re so young, they probably don’t even have the strength to get home. [But some do....]

Señor Pepe and Princess White Night

Vinnie: Lynne’ll tell you a story about a bird that came walking up...

Lynne: [Laughs] Señor Pepe. Vinnie had a race, and I was out training the pigeons. The race was on Sunday, and this was maybe Wednesday or Thursday. [Vinnie] said he was leaving the house, [and as] he pulled out of the garage, he sees a man across the street, walking, holding a pigeon. He’s looking at the guy, so he pulls up and says, “What you got there?” The guy says, “I found this pigeon walking down Monroe Street.” So Vinnie says, “That’s my bird!” [and] he gives Vinnie the bird. Vinnie brings it up here, he calls me up and he’s telling me this story. He says, “I don’t think this bird is going to make it until 6:00 tonight,” it was so —

Vinnie: Skin and bones.

Lynne:—it was so skinny. The bird couldn’t fly anymore, but he was walking. Can you believe it? He was walking. The only thing they have in their head is to go home, so, lo and behold, he did survive, and he did fly again. But it was a Spanish man who was carrying the bird, so I named him Señor Pepe, after that man. [Laughs] I do name my birds.

Vinnie: Not me.

Lynne: I get carried away.

Vinnie: When you get attached, something bad happens.

Lynne: That’s what he says. But Vinnie [will] raise a hundred-and-something pigeons. I only have twenty. So I do name some of them.

Vinnie: [And I use] numbers.

Lynne: [I do get attached. If I'm racing a pigeon and he or she doesn't come home,] I cry. My "Princess White Night" didn't come home one day from a race. It was a very hot day. Now I do not sit in the sun. I burn, right? So she's the only bird not home—my pet. I sit on the bench out there, in the afternoon, with the sun beating down on me. He comes up the stairs and I'm crying. I'm crying over this pigeon.

He said, "As soon as it gets cool, later on, she'll be home." And sure enough, like 6:00-7:00—I was in the house then, and he says, "You'd better go out and feed your bird." I went out, and she was home. So it must have gotten very hot, she stopped someplace, maybe under a bridge or in a tree or something, and when it got cool enough, she came home.



You've Got to Take Care of Your Birds

Lynne: There's bags and bags of feed out there, all different. Different feed for different things, right? For racing, to build them up, [and] in the winter, when they're not racing, you give them a different type of feed.

Vinnie: To keep the fat off. As long as they've got food and water in their bellies, they'll survive any temperature. Even little babies, this big. I don't close any windows or close anything. Them "clinkers" raise babies, right? The clinkers, the wild birds? They've got nothing. If they can survive, these could survive [and be strong.]

Lynne: The whole key to being a good pigeon racer and winning races is you've got to take care of your birds. You have to inoculate them against certain things. You've got to feed them the right way; you've got to water them the right way. Everything we do all year is based on the pigeons, whether we're going away on a vacation, or something's going on—the pigeons come first.



OPPOSITE: At the Hudson County Pigeon Club, Hoboken, 1970s. (Left to right): Mo from "Roosevelt Loft" in Bayonne; Nick, a flier from the Bronx with his partner, Tony Casanova, who twice won the Derby with the same bird; and Freddie Baccardo, Treasurer of the Hudson County Club.

Old Birds/Young Birds

Lynne: There are two seasons [for racing.] There's "old-bird" season—

Vinnie: That's like one-, two-, three-year-olds, five-year-olds —

Lynne:—which starts in April. Any bird born before [that year] is an old bird, to race in an old-bird race. April to June. August to the end of October is young birds. Only birds born in [that year] can race. I don't fly old birds, Vinnie flies old birds and young birds.

Vinnie: [You race many birds at a time, but there's a limit.] Twenty to a race.

Lynne:—to a race, in a club. But now he belongs to two clubs, so he can race forty birds in a week.

Vinnie: If there were sixty, I'd be there. [Laughs.] I'd go anywhere to race.

Lynne: One club maybe has one or two specials a year, so it's not just club members who can come in. That's how these clubs are able to survive, and pay their taxes and their water bill, and gas and electric—they have these special races to bring money into the club. So that's important, to have these club races. Of course, the winnings are better. A club race, what are you going to win? The most you can win is maybe \$100. In a band race, you can win more.

Vinnie: Big prizes. [But it's a lot of work, too. When I organize a race at Lyndhurst, for example,] I have to hire a hall, because 150 people come. They buy all their bands from our band secretary. [When] the race day comes, the birds with that band [are] the only ones that can go to that race. Every band gets read.

I hire a trucker. He comes with a trailer. He puts all the birds in the truck in baskets. [To figure out the winners we] GPS the location where [we] let them go, and GPS the [return] location. So if [we're releasing] in Pennsylvania, [we] would allow X-amount of time from the liberation point to my coop.

Lynne: There's one starting point, [but] you have all different finish lines. [With the electronic chip,] after the birds all come home, you take your clock to the club. The club has a special computer program. They download the clocks into that, and that calculates your yards-per-minute. The best yards-per-minute wins.

It's not like having one finish line, where everything comes into the same place. [Vinnie] and I have birds here, coming home; somebody else might have birds down in Woodbridge or Paterson. Anywhere in the state. So all those GPS distances are calculated.

The Return of the Hoboken Derby

Vinnie: The biggest race around [used to be] the Hoboken Derby. There were like 300 lofts, one bird, 300 miles, as a young bird, [to Virginia], and then one bird, 500 miles, as an old bird, [to] South Carolina. The Hoboken Derby—that was famous. It was in limbo for about fifteen or eighteen years—because everybody moved out of the town, and there were no more pigeon flyers. [But] I started that again [and flyers come from out of town with their birds.] I'm running it. Now we run a different course. To Cadiz, Ohio—350 miles. London, Ohio [is] the 500.



[Why did pigeon flyers leave Hoboken? For one,] because you're not allowed to have [birds] anymore. I'm grandfathered in. And the kids don't want to do all this work.

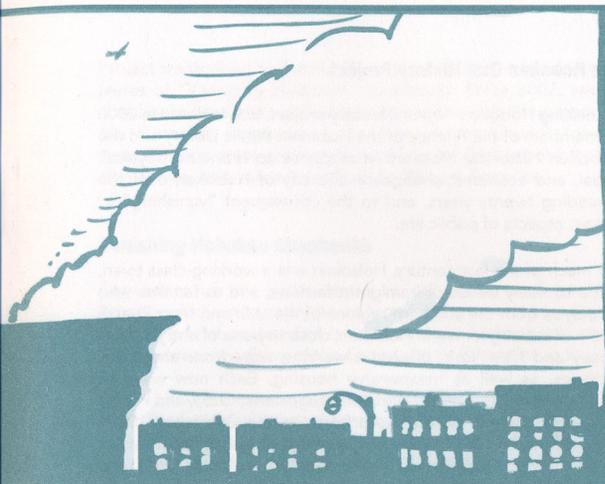
Lynne: It's a lot of work. A lot of work.

Vinnie: They all want to play on computers.

[Well,] there are a few [coops left] here and there, [but they're for] tiptles, not racing pigeons. [Except for me, there aren't any of the original people around now, in the club, or in Hoboken.] There's nobody left.

[So what do I think of Hoboken now?] Let me tell you: When I was a kid, wherever we were when dinnertime came, that's where we ate.

Lynne: Now you don't even know who's living next door to you.



Vinnie: [But with all the new residents, I haven't heard any complaints about the birds. Nobody has ever said anything.] They weren't interested. But these new people, here—

Lynne: You can see—there's a new building over there, and you can see them watching what's going on.

Vinnie: They wave to me.

Lynne: They're interested. On race day we're out here, and we cook. We sit and eat. We wave to the birds, we holler, we cheer. [Laughs] [We'll sit outside for hours on race day, waiting for the birds to come home.]

Vinnie: Day and night, sometimes.

LAST PAGE: Handbill for the Hoboken One-Bird Derby, 2008.

The Hoboken Oral History Project

"Vanishing Hoboken," an oral history project, was initiated in 2000 by members of the Friends of the Hoboken Public Library and the Hoboken Historical Museum in response to dramatic physical, social, and economic changes in the city of Hoboken over the preceding twenty years, and to the consequent "vanishing" of certain aspects of public life.

For much of the last century, Hoboken was a working-class town, home to many waves of immigrant families, and to families who journeyed from the southern regions of the U.S. and from Puerto Rico—all looking for work. Hoboken, close to ports of entry in New Jersey and New York, offered a working waterfront and many factories, as well as inexpensive housing. Each new wave of arrivals—from Germany, Ireland, Italy, Yugoslavia, Cuba, and Puerto Rico—found work on the waterfront, at the Bethlehem Steel Shipyards, Lipton Tea, Tootsie Roll, Maxwell House, or in numerous, smaller garment factories. Then the docks closed in the 1960s; and factory jobs dwindled as Hoboken's industrial base relocated over the 1970s and '80s. Maxwell House, once the largest coffee roasting plant in the world, was the last to leave, in 1992. In the go-go economy of the 1980s, Hoboken's row houses, just across the river from Manhattan, were targeted by developers to young professionals seeking an easy commute to New York City. Historically home to ever-changing waves of struggling families—who often left when they became prosperous—Hoboken began in the mid-1980s to experience a kind of reverse migration, where affluent condominium-buyers replaced poor and working class tenants, many of whom had been forced out by fire, through condo-conversion buy-outs, or through rising rents. More recently, building construction has further altered the face of Hoboken, as modern towers are rising up alongside the late-19th century row houses that once spatially defined our densely populated, mile-square city and provided its human scale.

The Hoboken Oral History Project was inaugurated with the goal of capturing, through the recollections of longtime residents, "Vanishing Hoboken"—especially its disappearing identity as a working-class city and its tradition of multi-ethnic living. In 2001, with the support of the New Jersey Historical Commission, a division of the Department of State, the Hoboken Oral History

Project transcribed and edited several oral histories to produce a series of "Vanishing Hoboken" chapbooks. Since 2002, twenty chapbooks have been published in the series, with the support of the Historical Commission, the New Jersey Council for the Humanities, a state partner of the National Endowment for the Humanities, and, more recently, John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

Vanishing Hoboken Chapbooks

The editor of this series chose to call these small booklets "chapbooks," a now rarely heard term for a once-common object. And so, a brief explanation is now required: A chapbook, states the most recent edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, is a

...small, inexpensive, stitched tract formerly sold by itinerant dealers, or chapmen, in Western Europe and in North America. Most chapbooks were 5 x 4 inches in size and were made up of four pages (or multiples of four), illustrated with woodcuts. They contained tales of popular heroes, legends and folklore, jests, reports of notorious crimes, ballads, almanacs, nursery rhymes, school lessons, farces, biblical tales, dream lore, and other popular matter. The texts were mostly rough and anonymous, but they formed the major parts of secular reading and now serve as a guide to the manners and morals of their times.

Chapbooks began to appear in France at the end of the 15th century. Colonial America imported them from England but also produced them locally. These small booklets of mostly secular material continued to be popular until inexpensive magazines began to appear during the early 19th century.

Although some of the chapbooks in the Vanishing Hoboken series are considerably longer than their earlier counterparts, others are nearly as brief. They are larger in size, to allow us to use a reader-friendly type size. But all resemble the chapbooks of yesteryear, as they contain the legends, dreams, crime reports, jokes, and folklore of our contemporaries. One day, perhaps, they might even serve as guides to the "manners and morals" of our city, during the 20th and early 21st centuries.

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**Any birds suspected of being on the darkening system will be disqualified if found guilty.
Five (5) tip rule in effect & all birds will be checked. Birds will be subject to random drug
testing. Committee reserves the right to investigate. Committee decision is final.**

**ELECTRONIC CLOCKS: Bricon, Benzing systems are permitted.
(FOR OTHER CLOCK SYSTEMS, THE FLYER MUST SUPPLY THE CLUB UNIT)
ELECTRONIC RACE RESULTS MAY BE FAXED TO THE CLUB**

**FLYER IS RESPONSIBLE TO HAVE CORRECT BAND NUMBER AND INITIALS IN
HIS ELECTRONIC CLOCKING SYSTEM. NO EXCEPTIONS**

REFRESHMENTS TO BE SERVED

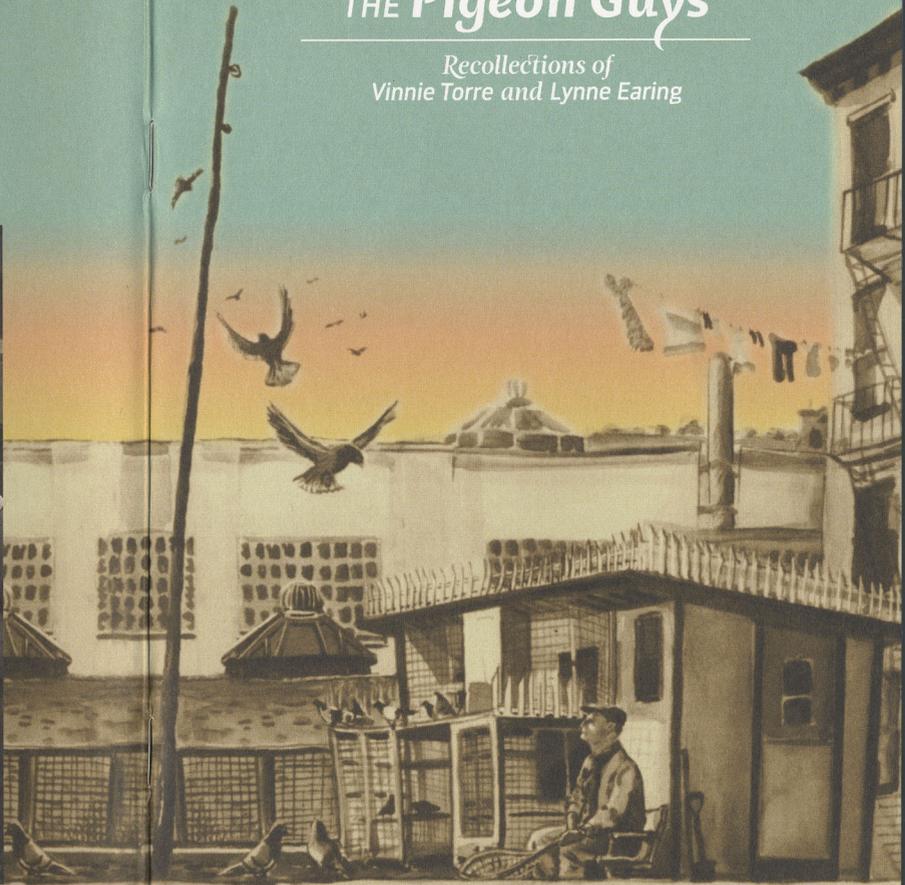
PARKING IN LOT ACROSS FROM CLUBHOUSE

**FOR MORE INFORMATION, CONTACT: VINNIE TORRE (201-798-1496)
JIMMY CORSO (201-450-4551) JOHN CROWN (201-339-8159) ERIC GIOIOSA (718-948-4557)**



THE PIGEON GUYS

Recollections of
Vinnie Torre and Lynne Earing



A Project of the Friends of the Hoboken Public Library
and the Hoboken Historical Museum