

# Homing pigeons fill 80 years of Otis Day's flights of fancy

By June W. Kennedy

Although this town has enjoyed a long history, some of Westford's most colorful characters still inhabit its environs. Some years ago, Cold Spring Road resident Otis Day reminisced with genuine candor about his past:

**"P**igeons! I've had a weakness for them all my life. When I was about 10 years old I got some pigeons. Reuben Taylor, selectman — lived down at the schoolhouse on Stony Brook Road — he was gonna give me a pair. He worked down to Abbot's Mill for years — used to ride to work on a bicycle.

"The morning he was supposed to bring 'em up, I was out in the yard there waitin', sittin' on the bottom rung of a ladder. Pretty soon Reuben came peddlin' up the road. He had a grain bag over the handle bars and in it were two pigeons. They were the first ones," said Otis Day.

"Later in 1901, Warren Carlin gave me a pair of homing pigeons, and then at the Agricultural Fair in Lowell I got me a pigeon that was supposed to have flown a hundred miles. Had them all just a few years. I was only a kid.

"Well, I went up to Amherst, so I had to get rid of my birds. One night I put them in a box and took them up to Alex Fisher's in the Center. He butchered and also took pigeons into the city to sell 'em. I think he paid 10¢ a piece. I made a little wish at the time I was going up that someday I could have some pigeons again and fly 'em a hundred miles. That was back in '04, '05 or '06.

"Years later, after World War II, the government put a notice in the poultry paper we took. They were dispersing Army pigeons from Missouri at \$5 a pair. I got some. That next fall, Avis, our daughter, was up to Skidmore College. I sent her up a



IN A PHOTO taken several years ago, Otis Day admires one of his favorite pigeons, a dark check hen with white wing feathers. On one occasion, this 13-year-old bird flew from Toledo, Ohio, to Westford, covering 630 miles in a day. Homing pigeons occupied over 80 years of Otis Day's life. (Courtesy of June Kennedy)

box of 'em so she could set 'em out up there. She wrote messages and put them on three or four birds — a continuous story.

"I remember the first message came in on the last bird — Necktie, a blue flash. A good bird, but just a little slow.

"The farthest distance I've flown 'em is from Chicago, Illinois — 1000 miles. Each year we'd fly 'em up to 600 miles on the old birds in the spring of the year. And that's a pretty good stunt. They don't always make it in a day by a long shot. Yet we've had 'em come in over a mile a minute.

"I had one little bird out there that was a Blue; his father flew from Toledo, Ohio — 630 miles in a day. Young birds that hatch in the spring we'd fly in the fall at 300 miles.

"It's always fascinated me how a little doggone bird, doesn't weigh a pound, can be thrown 3,600 miles from home and find its way back. Some-

where in that 1800-mile circumference is their 10 x 12 foot coop and they know it.

"As I say, they know how to put a man on the moon, but they don't know how the pigeon gets home. And they sure do work hard to get home. I've had 'em come back with broken legs and feathers — victims of weather and hawks. Several times they've come home with a broken crop.

"I remember one flew in and went to the water dish. As it drank, the water ran right out onto its feet. I brought that pigeon in the house and sewed it up. 'Twas all right."

All this represents over 80 years in pigeons. Otis gave up his pigeons a few years back. But now, well up into his nineties, he still must think about the special place they played in his long life.

June Kennedy is a Westford resident and author of "Westford Recollections", a series of historical vignettes and photos.