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Final fight

The last of the ‘pigeon guys’ leaves Hoboken

by Carlo Davis

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The dusty trophies are piled in boxes in a breezy garage on Monroe Street, next to a lone bag of seed. On the roof, a lattice of cages lies empty and partially deconstructed, silent for perhaps the first time in 60 years. Only a pair of stone owls on the front porch still holds a vigil.

Vincent Torre is leaving Hoboken, and with him leaves the last link to a proud tradition that once filled the skies with clouds of gray feathers.

First introduced by Italian immigrants in the late 19th century, pigeon racing thrived in Hoboken and New York City in the era before television and urban renewal. When Torre got his first bird in 1955, he estimates that there were over 60 pigeon lofts in the mile-square city. In fact, the main character in “On the Waterfront,” which was filmed in and based on events in Hoboken, raised pigeons.

Pigeon racing was a gentle sport practiced by rough men with nicknames like “Fat Charlie,” “Joey 1-A,” and “Mike The Cop.” No common street “clinkers,” the racing homers of Hoboken were specially bred for speed, fed and washed by hand, able to fly 600 miles in a day, and to find their way home in any conditions.

“They’re [the] thoroughbreds of the sky,” said Torre in a recent interview at his former home in Hoboken. “They’ve got pedigrees going back 200 years.”

Torre has no intention of giving up breeding and racing these remarkable birds, but as of last month, he is no longer doing so on the roof of his family’s Monroe Street home, which was sold in December.

A hundred finish lines

Racing homers are bred above all for their homing instinct – the innate, magnetic sense of direction that made them prized messengers for the early Reuters news service and the military powers of Europe during World War I.

In pigeon races, homers are released together at the same location, but each flies to its respective home coop, where its time is now recorded by a GPS chip. The bird with the fastest average speed, measured in yards per minute, wins.

“There’s one liberation point and a hundred different finish lines,” said Torre. “You can lose by a thousandth of a second.”

“People got old, and there was nobody following in their footsteps.” – Vincent Torre

Though racing pigeons have lost popularity in the eastern United States, they are still big business in Europe and around the world. In 2013, a Belgian bird shattered the world record for most expensive pigeon when it was sold to a Chinese buyer for \$400,000.

Torre has sold eggs to European buyers for \$1,200 each. His birds can command such prices because Torre is a champion flyer, having won over 400 races since the 1960s. So renowned is his skill at raising pigeons that in 2011, he was selected to serve as Mike Tyson’s trainer on a six-episode Animal Planet series called “Taking on Tyson.”

Long decline

The sale of Torre’s childhood home at 528 Monroe St. last December, and the relocation of his 65-bird flock to his new home in Wayne, marks the final act of a decades-long denouement for the sport of pigeon flying in Hoboken.

Starting in the late 1960s, the construction of new towers like Marineview Plaza led to the removal of scores of pigeon lofts on Hudson and River streets. Eventually, the city banned coops on residential buildings altogether, though

established flyers like Torre were grandfathered in.

Lack of interest among the youth was equally as deadly. It's telling that Torre's nickname among the pigeon guys when he was starting out in the sport was "Vinnie the Kid." Even in 1955, the pigeon racing community was mostly made up of his father's generation, the same working class Italian and Irish immigrants who would leave for the suburbs as Hoboken sputtered in the 1970s, then roared to life as an artsy enclave in the 1980s.

"People got old, and there was nobody following in their footsteps," said Torre. "I have nobody following in my footsteps. My daughter wouldn't care if [the pigeons] fell off the roof."

Since 1995, Torre and his partner Lynne Earing have been the only pigeon flyers left in Hoboken. The former headquarters of the Hudson County Racing Pigeon Club, a low-slung brick building on Newark Street, is now occupied by a boxing gym. Of the original members of the club, only three are still alive.

The younger generation are "not interested to commit themselves to taking care of animals," said Torre. "You've got to be a pigeon lover and you've got to commit yourself to [working] every day, Christmas, New Year's, birthdays, weddings."

Lost lifestyle

With the benefit of hindsight, Torre can now see that Hoboken's racing homers were the canary in the coalmine. As they dwindled, so did the whole fragile way of life that defined Torre's childhood.

"Nobody locked their doors," he recalled of Hoboken in the 1950s. "When you were a kid, you heard all the mothers screaming out the windows for their kids to come to dinner, and then wherever you were at that time when dinner came, that's where you ate...you used to scream, 'Mom, I'm eating over at Alphonse's house!'"

Now Torre says he doesn't know anyone on his block. In the end, Hurricane

Sandy provided the push that convinced him to finally leave. The storm surge hit southern Monroe Street with five and a half feet of water.

“I had seven pumps in my garage and it wasn’t enough,” he said.

The rising value of property in Hoboken didn’t hurt either. According to county deed records, Torre sold his family’s four adjacent lots on Monroe Street for \$3.5 million.

“They made me an offer I couldn’t refuse,” he explained.

The homing instinct

Leaving Hoboken is more than just a symbolic ending for Torre. Because racing homers are trained to return to a single loft for their entire lives, all 65 pigeons raised at Torre’s “Hillside Loft” must be retired from racing forever. “If you let them out, they’ll come back here,” he said.

Appropriately, his birds’ final race was last month’s Hoboken 1-Bird Derby, stretching 496 miles from London, Ohio back to the mile-square city.

Once among the most famous races in the New York area, the Derby was revived by Torre in 2008 but draws a fraction of the field of competitors it once did. When he holds the 94th annual Derby next spring, no pigeons will return to Hoboken, for the first time ever.

Like his birds, Torre can’t help being drawn back to Hoboken, the only home he has ever known.

“When I’m up in Wayne and I have to go to Bayonne, I have to pass here,” he said of his Monroe Street home. “I’m drawn to it.”

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