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THE GREAT PIGEON SHOOT

by S. Ray Granade

7/30/09

Most folks associate pigeons with cities, and particularly with European cities. I am not among them. I grew up in a small south-Alabama county-seat town. Railroad tracks bisected downtown, which had moved a bit south and west to straddle the railroad when it came through. U.S. Highway 31, the main route from Montgomery to Mobile, came in from the east, crossed the tracks on a large bridge that everyone called “the viaduct,” formed West Front Street as it paralleled the tracks heading south through town, then parted company heading southwest after four blocks. One block west of the viaduct was Conecuh County’s Victorian courthouse; two blocks east, across the tracks, stood the turn-of-the-century Evergreen Baptist Church with its red-domed roof.

No one ever ventured a guess whence the pigeons came, but they were a fact of life during the 1950s. They roosted under the viaduct, avoiding only the span over the tracks under which steam engines chuffed or diesels roared their way as they approached or left the two crossings downtown. Pigeons enjoyed the sanctuary of the courthouse and church roofs, finding landing spots from which to watch for food or ways into the structures and even more protected roosting places. At times a flock of twenty to thirty would wheel through the air from a roof to the viaduct or from viaduct to roof. No one ever tallied their number, but general consensus seemed to have settled on fifty. Perhaps it was just a good, round number that satisfied the sense of “many” but was less than a hundred, which everyone agreed was too high.

Pigeons were a nuisance, and no one had any brief for them. They were just a fact of life, one of those constants with which one had to contend like summer warmth and humidity. No one talked about histoplasmosis, but most in Evergreen regarded pigeons as flying rats and were sure that they carried disease. Everyone wanted to rid town of those pesky pigeons, but none could quite bring themselves to come up with a plan and execute it—and the pigeons.

As a small town surrounded with farmland, woods, and streams, Evergreen had at least its share of field-and-stream enthusiasts. Most were male; rare was the boy who didn’t hunt or fish. Also like many small rural enclaves, Evergreen had a social network that had been in place long enough for most folks to be related, at greater or lesser remove, to each other. It was a small informal setting where deals concluded on handshakes and children caught transgressing local mores met swift justice at their parents’ hands, even when apprehended by local officials. Also like most small Southern towns, local authority rested in the hands of men who attended the Baptist or Methodist—or, perhaps, the small Presbyterian and even smaller Episcopalian—church.

Although folks might on occasion talk business at church, most decisions were made at the town’s unofficial center of gravity, a small place frequented by the field-and-stream set called The Sweet Shop. Run by a man who had owned the local junk yard but found himself bored enough in retirement to get up in time to open a coffee shop by 5 AM, it had supplanted the coffee shop next to the theater to become the gathering place before going hunting or fishing (hence the 5 AM opening) and again mid-morning and mid-afternoon for those inclined to sip coffee and talk.

Evergreen mayor Henry Sessions ran the Conecuh Quick Freeze and always made himself available at The Sweet Shop. I'm certain that The Great Pigeon Shoot emerged from conversations there and other private ones within the city. A gentleman's agreement resulted that involved city officials, local law enforcement (city and county), and congregants of the Evergreen Baptist Church, particularly the deacons.

As pastor, Daddy coordinated the day. He surely selected the shooters, picking those he knew, from close association in the dove fields, who practiced gun safety (he'd once been shot in the back of the ear by a gunner following a dove down and spraying the field with #6 shot as the bird sailed in at corn-stalk level) and could be trusted to aim high. Marshalling his forces, Daddy selected a handful to line up across the church house's front yard, paralleling and facing the railroad tracks, and another handful for the viaduct, spread out in a line that stretched from the county library, tucked into the triangular corner of East Front and Park streets at the viaduct's base, across the railroad tracks almost to the Bank of Evergreen's corner where Rural Street crossed West Front Street as the viaduct touched earth again.

The agreement seems to have been that the shooters would do their work on a Sunday afternoon, when foot and vehicular traffic would be at its lowest ebb and the fewest people would be around; local officials would look the other way. Daddy's instructed everyone to shoot skyward and to remember not to shoot in such a way that they might hit a car on the viaduct. The plan, a simple one, required that shooters keep the pigeons circling in the air, going from church to viaduct and back again. It would be like shooting fish in a barrel. They would have no sanctuary.

The Great Pigeon Shoot unfolded as planned, initially sounding, as one deacon put it, like "a young war." No one kept count of the number of pigeons knocked out of the air as they wheeled from viaduct to church and back again, only to meet a curtain of shot each time. All we knew was that, for a time afterward, no pigeons molested church house or courthouse roof or clapped their wings with a resounding pop as they flew out from under the viaduct. And that their numbers remained low until a city poisoning program obliterated them. As to where the dead birds went, that was better known.

Some of the town's dogs, who roamed loose in the days before leash laws and fenced yards—as long as they had a rabies tag visible—managed to snatch up a few birds and dine on them unmolested under houses or in comparatively wooded safety. Since everyone hated the idea of waste, someone (which probably meant Daddy) had talked to someone (which probably meant either the woman who often cleaned game for us on portions or perhaps meant the church janitor) and made arrangements for the pigeons to go down the block and around the corner. On Cemetery Avenue, which intersected Park Street, a long block of houses occupied by black families stretched east and faced the old city cemetery. The pigeons made their way from the killing ground between the viaduct and church house to supper tables throughout that part of the black community.

I think that the timing really bothered Daddy, for, while not a Sabbatarian, he did believe that Sunday was a day of rest. But I also think that he found the opportunity to rid the church building of pigeons too compelling to pass up and so relied on the statement by Jesus that "The Sabbath was made for man and not man for the Sabbath."