

Bethinking of Old Orleans

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WASTEFUL FOLLY



Our photo this week, dating back to the 1870's, is taken from the files of the Orleans County Department of History. It is a trophy which was evidently the award for championship Passenger Pigeon shooting in New York State. To me it represents a grandiose blunder for glory which ended in wasteful folly.

Passenger Pigeons, *Ectopistes migratorius*, were once extremely common throughout the U.S. but have been completely extinct since 1914 when the last one died in captivity. These birds were about 16½ inches long and were used for food, agriculture fertilizer and simply the sport of shooting them.

The male was slate gray, tinted with greenish brown, above, and was wine red on the breast and white on the abdomen. The female differed from the male in having a grayish-brown breast. Passenger pigeons nested in large colonies in trees; often as many as fifty nests were built in one tree. Since the extermination of these birds, laws against the killing of wild pigeons have been established in many states.

An old colored print of one hangs in the second floor meeting room of the Swan Library.

Here are a couple of stories handed down in my family about Passenger Pigeons: My great grandfather was to have said that when a flock of these birds flew over, they would darken the sun because there were so many. My grandfather told that often large nets were used to catch them in, the birds then were later used at a pigeon shoot for which an award was given to the man who could shoot the most. On one occasion they captured so many in a net the pigeons started to fly up with it when rails from a fence were quickly gathered to weigh it down.

"We have set ourselves over many things. We have gathered terrible powers into our hands. We have made ourselves masters of the planets, users of its stores, governors of its teeming life, exploiters of its energies of fire and fission. We have built and we have torn down; we have created and we have despoiled. We have chosen ourselves to be the leaders; but where are we leading the earth and its creatures?"

--Kenneth L. Patton

Note the various aspects of the trophy or cup shown here. At the base are two men both with guns. The one on the left appears to be aiming his shot gun ready to shoot. The other to the right, is simply holding his rifle. Above them perched on a rail, are a number of passenger pigeons. A bas relief portrait of a man is embossed in a medallion at the top of the cup. Our picture was taken by C.W. Tallman, a photographer in Batavia over one hundred years ago.