# PERSONAL RECOLLECTIONS OF THE PASSENGER PIGEON.[1]

BY ETTA S. WILSON.

THE history of the Passenger Pigeon (*Ectopistes migratorius*) is well-known and the early writers have devoted much time and space to this bird whose size, beauty, utility and habits brought it before the eyes of the most unobservant. Jacques Cartier wrote about in in 1578, the Jesuit Fathers of Acadia in 1610, and many other ornithologists recorded observations down to the time of Wilson, Audubon, and the later scientists. Ranging from Florida to the British Possessions according to the season, its numbers were so incredibly vast that the belief that it never could be exterminated or even decimated seemed warranted.

But callous heartlessness, merciless cruelty and insatiable greed, combined in the habitual pursuit of this bird, resulted in its extinction not long ago. I do not intend to go into the history of the Passenger Pigeon but only to make note of those phases of the Pigeon industry in which I took an active part.

My childhood home was on the brow of a hill in Northport, Leelanau county, Michigan, a few rods west of Grand Traverse Bay. Our property had a frontage of one mile on the bay and extended westward over a series of hills paralleling the shore, and, with the exception of about twenty acres, was a heavily wooded forest of beech (*Fagus ferruginea*), maple (*Acer saccharinum*), cedar (*Thuja occidentalis*), and hemlock (*Abies canadensis*). In addition throughout the county there was a sprinkling of oak (*Quercus alba*), tamarack (*Larix americana*), pine (*Pinus strobus*), birch (*Betula lutea* and *B. papyracea*), ash (*Fraxinus americana* and *F. sambucifolia*), mountain ash (*Pyrus americana*), and on the sandy beaches juniper (*Juniperus alpina*) and a luscious purple-red fruit which we knew as sand cherries, probably *Prunus pumila*.

In those days the county was almost a wilderness and few of its many acres had felt the quiver of timber felled by the modern ax and saw. Below the hill and between our house and the bay, was

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a pasture of about four acres and south of that flat land was virgin forest.

Each year the Pigeons came in late April. In that part of the state old snow often remains on the ground during the greater part of this month and the first flights were timed for arrival about the time the food supply was beginning to be visible. At first the birds fed on beech nuts lying thickly on the ground; wintergreen berries (*Gaultheria procumbens*) and partridge berries (*Mitchella repens*), evergreen plants which retain their fruit all winter; and the seeds of some conifers. Later they added June berries (*Amelanchier canadensis*), and the red elderberry (*Sambucus pubens*), actually gorging themselves upon the latter. All the fruits mentioned, with considerable coarse sand or fine gravel were found in the stomachs of the birds when dressed for the cooking pot. We found also the wild red cherries (*Prunus pennsylvanica*), chokecherries (*P. virginiana*), occasionally a few acorns, and masses of small seeds, probably weed seeds, in addition to wheat and oats garnered from the shorn fields. Invariably after a rain storm we found angle-worms with other small worms and insects. We never found any green herbage or trace of garden crops and I never heard anyone say that the birds destroyed cultivated crops of any kind although they sometimes came into our yard in late summer to eat the ripening berries of the mountain ash, a line of these trees having been transplanted to shade a footpath.

The Passenger Pigeon was a wildling and his life and activities were confined to the woodland where he found home and sustenance.

They were beautiful birds about sixteen inches long, with upperparts mainly bluish-slate and underparts rich chestnut. A brilliant iridescence covered the back and the sides of the head of the male. Females were slightly smaller, duller in color, and without the metallic sheen. The young resembled the female but their feathers were largely tipped with white.

In migration they flew in such enormous flocks that it was almost impossible to separate one group from another and at times the air was filled with a speeding host so closely banded together and flying in layers, one above the other, that the rays of the sun were intercepted and daylight was reduced to the dusk of a partial eclipse. Occasionally the upper tiers were seen flying southward.

They had evidently reached the tip of the Leelanau peninsula and finding the broad expanse of Lake Michigan before them returned to find a narrower crossing. Swift on the wing and tireless in flight additional miles did not daunt them.

Flight formation was generally a large irregular mass with a broad indented vanguard. I never saw a flock in the V-shaped formation characteristic of the flight of many species of waterfowl.

On alighting in a tree they stood erect this attitude being one of great beauty and dignity.

A "Pigeon roost" was always a nesting site and the birds roosted and bred regularly about five miles south of Northport, in a tract of timber twenty-two and a half miles long and in width from one and a half to three miles, lying between Lake Leelanau and Grand Traverse Bay. They occupied the site from their first arrival until long after the young had been raised and had flown. At this late day no correct estimate can be made of the probable number of the bird inhabitants of this place but when nesting time came there were nests in every tree from the slender sapling to the forest giant and the structures were so closely massed together that many over-weighted limbs broke and crashed to the ground with their burdens. The nests were frail affairs composed of small sticks and twigs holding one egg usually but sometimes two, and were so carelessly built that the egg would sometimes fall through to the ground. Both sexes incubated and flights to the feeding grounds in the northern part of the county were made Quaker fashion, the males flying in the early morning and the females later in the day. The old birds never fed near the roost apparently leaving the available food for the youngsters which were fat and unable to fly for several days after leaving the nest.

The great feeding flights were from daybreak to about 9 A. M., the return being made irregularly during the balance of the day when birds could be seen flying both ways, to and from the nesting place. There was always a fairly large homeward flight about sundown. The birds generally avoided trips over large bodies of water and it is probable that Leelanau County Pigeons confined their feeding flights entirely to the land during their summer stay at their breeding places.

My father, Mr. Payson Wolf (Mi-in-gun), was the champion

hunter and Pigeon shooter of the northland. He was the only descendent of a long line of great chiefs of the Ottawas, noted for their prowess as hunters and his father, Mi-in-gun, was so named because he had the courage, strength and skill to catch and strangle a live wolf with his bare hands. His mother, Kin-ne-quay, an Indian princess, daughter of the famous chief Waŭk-a-zoo, was a skilled "medicine woman" of fine character, rare beauty and great fortitude. Their marriage took place when she was forty-four years old and he was twenty-two, having been arranged by the "headmen" of the tribe in the hope of perpetuating the double line of these two families. They were married in 1832 and my father was born in August of the following year. He was their only child. He married Mary, the golden-haired daughter of the white missionary, the Rev. Geo. N. Smith, of Swanton, Vt., and they became the parents of thirteen children.

In my youth I was identified with all the processes of the traffic in Pigeons, first as a retriever, then as a sorter and packer, then as one of those busy persons who plucked the birds, cleaned and cooked them, and finally ate them.

When the Pigeons arrived father went out on the brow of the hill a few yards from our door at break of day, and met the first flocks skimming over the tree tops south of the pasture, and mounting up the sharp crest of the terrace in recurrent masses. Armed with his famous muzzle-loading, double-barrelled shot gun, and always accompanied by a number of his dozen children, he took his stand at the edge of the cliff-like hill. The children carried two big clothes-baskets in which to gather the game. The first flocks usually flew a few moments apart but with advancing daylight they became an almost continuous procession and father stood there, loading and reloading, as fast as his expert fingers could manipulate the charges, and he wasted no time waiting for a good chance but fired, reloaded and fired again and again. The charge was an unmeasured handful of powder poured from his powder flask, a bunch of wadding tamped down, another unmeasured handful of bird shot, also wadded down with ramrod, hastily but expertly. He always fired both barrels into the same flock. "Bang, bang," would go the gun and the birds would rattle down around us like a double handful of gravel. I have seen an incredible number of birds drop in the

one double explosion. We frequently gathered upward of seventy Pigeons at one discharge of the gun but I have heard my mother say that she once saw him bring down 124 birds at one shot, and she was a truthful woman.

We soon filled the big clothes-basket, carried it to the house, and emptied it in the dooryard where mother and some of the older children began at once to sort the birds dressing some for immediate use; then we returned to the hill where we often found the second basket almost filled. Exchanging baskets in this way and piling the game in the dooryard enabled us to handle the birds with celerity and we built up mounds of birds and rows of mounds. No number of persons available working within the house were able to care for the birds as fast as they were brought home. Father never came to breakfast, nor did we have any, until he had bagged from 1000 to 1200 Pigeons. He had an uncanny sense of knowing about how many he had shot, although apparently paying no attention to the count. Suddenly he would say, "Come, children, let's go to breakfast, guess we've got our thousand." Pigeons were still flying over and guns were still banging all around but he knew when he had enough.

That hill was in an enclosed orchard on our premises but many hunters came to it without hindrance because it was the most favorable local site for Pigeon shooting. The well-known sound of my father's double-barreled shotgun was the tocsin which wakened the men of the village and the cry, "That's Payson's gun, the Pigeons must be coming" penetrated every home and the men swarmed up the hill and began the daily slaughter which continued from day to day without interruption until the birds, following their usual habits or perhaps worn with ceaseless attacks, no longer flew over this route in sufficient masses to warrant the long wait for them. In the small town of Northport numbering about 200 persons, practically every man and big boy came to our place to shoot and each one got some birds, but my father was the only one who brought them down by the hundred. Some of the hunters said enviously that it was the gun: "Payson's gun is a wonder," they said, but later when he sold it the weapon seemed to have lost its efficiency.

A laughable incident occurred one day. The revenue cutter

*Andrew Johnson* with cadets on board for a practice cruise lay in the harbor in the morning. Cadets on shore leave saw the Pigeon shooting and returning to the boat said to the officer in charge: "There's an old Indian up on the hill shooting Pigeons by the thousand." The officer said: "You may have additional shore leave. Go up to that hill and shoot enough Pigeons to feed every officer and man on this ship for a week," and his mouth watered.

So the boys returned with their carbines—to the country people "fancy shooting irons"—all cleaned and polished, marched up to our hill and took their stand with the other hunters. One of my small brothers, being greatly impressed by the shining guns and natty uniforms of the cadets said: "Now the Pigeons will suffer." Courteously permitted favorite stands by the hunters the cadets blazed away at the flocks but all they seemed to do was to make a big noise. They got few birds.

Of course the first spring flights were of old birds. As they came over the tree tops they were met by a perfect fusillade from the hunters at the top of the hill at the moment when they swept upward to clear the heights. The early flocks flew in close formation and therefore made a good mark for even the most inexperienced hunters who could not fail to bring down some birds when they fired right into the mass a few rods away and in line with their position. As the season advanced the Pigeons grew wary and came over the woods in open formation so that the combined discharge of the guns did not bring down a great many.

But when the young were strong enough to fly the slaughter began. Flying in exclusive flocks the fledglings came over the trees closely banded together and the first shots instead of scattering them threw them into a huddle where they hoped to find safety in close companionship. I have seen a flock of hundreds of inexperienced birds fly up the hill top and meeting the barrage of guns, falter, hesitate, turn and pass the entire gamut of the line thus exposing themselves twice to the attack, and return whence they came. If twenty-five individuals survived the double onslaught they were lucky.

It was amazing how low the birds flew, particularly the young ones. After leaving the forest they dipped low over the pasture, then rose sharply when they reached the foot of the hill, barely

clearing the heads of the hunters. So low were they when they reached the crest that men, boys, and even some women and girls, got quite a few by throwing clubs and stones at them. We had a big watch dog, of reputable mixed bull and shepherd descent, an efficient custodian of our premises but no hunter. When Pigeon time came he was always the first to reach the hill whining with excitement and jumping crazily around in a frenzy of expectation. I have seen him spring up into the air as a low flying flock came upward and grab a bird on the wing. In June when wounded birds fell into the deep grass of the meadow he would dash out with whoever retrieved them and show great delight over their recovery. He would locate wounded birds and kill them, but he never brought them in.

I could never kill a wounded bird. But I had to pick it up and it would look at me with its wild frightened red eyes and with one or both wings or legs broken or shot off, it struggled in my hands while its little heart beat in rapid tempo against the palms of my hands. I would take it to father who would break its neck with one expert twist of his strong hands, or one of my brothers would dispose of it in the same manner.

After the daily morning kill there was little time for tasks other than the care and dipsosal of the birds. Buyers for the Chicago market were ready to take hundreds of dozens of them, but the birds had to be sorted to eliminate those which were too badly mutilated. Of the immense number killed very few were destroyed. We tied them by the feet into bundles of one dozen each and also filled barrels with uncounted birds, the latter being sold "by the barrel." Mother always told father that when he sold by the barrel he always cheated himself in the count but his invariable response was: "I'd rather cheat myself than anyone else."

As there was no railroad in the county shipments were made by lake boat to Chicago and could be sent only on the days when the boats were due. But the Pigeon carrying trade was profitable and during the height of the season the lake passenger and packet freighters called at our port almost daily. Father always sold as many as he could and any surplus was salted down in pork barrels for winter use. Freshened over night in clear water the flesh was almost as palatable as that of the freshly killed bird.

Many Pigeons were eaten each day throughout the season. In our large family four dozen or more could be eaten in one day. The birds were not large and a husky boy could devour three at one meal. Always desiring to emulate my brothers in anything they might do, I ate three Pigeons at dinner one day but the after effects were so upsetting that they nearly robbed me of my Pigeon appetite for that summer.

Ordinarily we stewed or baked the birds, adding quite a large piece of salt pork to the old birds since they were never very fat. Mother had a big pot and into it she would pack as many birds as it would hold, cover them with cold water, add the pork cut into small pieces and sliced potatoes, season with salt and black pepper and stew for about forty-five minutes. Or she would place a similar combination in a big dripping pan and bake in the huge elevated oven, which was capacious enough to cook a meal for our big family.

Young birds were so enormously fat that we usually broiled or fried them but it was a long task to prepare enough birds in this way for so many persons. Less time was required to cook young birds, they were extremely tender, but I never ate a Pigeon of any age that was not delicate and delicious. The meat is darker than the dark meat of a chicken and is entirely without strong taste. When stewed the meat separates readily from the small bones and every part of the cooked bird may be eaten.

The task of preparing the birds for home consumption was exhausting. We spent hours plucking the feathers which came away very easily whether the Pigeons were freshly killed or had lain for some hours, saving the softer ones for the making of pillows and beds, and the further preparation for the cooking pot and salt barrel consumed additional weary hours. On the days when the boats came into port and the shipments went out father sold additional dozens to the boats' cook for use on board, receiving the standard ten cents per dozen for them when there was not an over-supply and only five cents per dozen for them when they were offered in overwhelming numbers. Sometimes he was able to dispose of a few more birds by taking his pay in what we knew as "baker' bread" to distinguish it from home made bread. A dozen Pigeons for a loaf of bread was considered a fair exchange.

Mother gave to neighbors who were not skilled hunters, or did not shoot any game, all the birds they wanted for home use without charge. A neighbor from over the way would come to the back door and say: "Oh, Mrs. Wolf, can you spare a few Pigeons?" and mother would answer: "Take all you want." And Mrs. Neighbor would stop by the piles of birds in the dooryard and go away with her arms full. No monetary value was placed on the birds which were not taken by the professional buyers; and after our needs were filled many families were supplied with feathers for pillows and beds. Pigeon feathers are soft, that is the body feathers, but have not the lasting qualities of goose or duck feathers.

While the main feeding flights were confined to the spring months, up to and including early July, there were Pigeons to be shot all summer and our table was always supplied with this nourishing meat by my brothers. Having other interests father spent little time out with the gun after provision had been made for the winter reserve.

But the Northport hunters were not the only ones who took these birds. Not only Leelanau County but all of the upper part of the lower peninsula of Michigan became a vast shooting range. Professional hunters, "Pigeoners" we named them, came from every part of the United States. Among their number was a Mr. Wrisley, of Connecticut, who made so much money catching and shipping the live birds directly to the trap shooters' clubs, where the final cruel end came to them, that he retired, and taking up his residence in Northport lived comfortably throughout the remainder of his days on his profits from the Pigeon industry. Some of his descendents still live there.

The Pigeoners came with nets and other paraphernalia with which to trap the birds in vast numbers with the minimum of time and expense. Mere shooting would probably never have exterminated a species which flew in millions and numbered billions; but it must be a super-vigorous race, abnormally reproductive, which can successfully combat systematic, wholesale attacks at all times and places including the breeding time and territory.

The roosts were scenes of horror. Father never visited them but my brothers sometimes went out with friends more out of curiosity than from any desire to take the birds. They never brought any back.

Day and night the horrible business continued. Bird lime covered everything and lay deep on the ground. Pots burning sulphur vomited their lethal fumes here and there suffocating the birds. Gnomes in the forms of men wearing old, tattered clothing, heads covered with burlap and feet encased in old shoes or rubber boots went about with sticks and clubs knocking off the birds' nests while others were chopping down trees and breaking off the over-laden limbs to gather the squabs. Pigs turned into the roost to fatten on the fallen birds added their squeals to the general clamor when stepped on or kicked out of the way, while the high, cackling notes of the terrified Pigeons, a bit husky and hesitant as though short of breath, combined into a peculiar roar, unlike any other known sound, and which could be heard at least a mile away.

Of the countless thousands of birds bruised, broken and fallen, a comparatively few could be salvaged yet wagon loads were being driven out in an almost unbroken procession, leaving the ground still covered with living, dying, dead and rotting birds. An inferno where the Pigeons had builded their Eden.

As the season advanced birds were taken in countless numbers in the harvested fields which they visited to feed on the waste grain. In these fields the Pigeoners set their nets, baited mainly with wheat although oats were also used, and at every spring of the trap hundreds were captured which were crated and sent alive to the Chicago market and to the trap-shooting clubs to be used as targets. The crates were somewhat similar to those now used in shipping poultry.

The last nesting in Leelanau County was, I believe, in 1877 and it was not large compared with former nestings. A steady decrease in the number of mating birds had been noted during several preceding years. The same site was occupied but with a diminishing area and there were fewer birds to the tree, or to the acre, or both. Flights were smaller and fear was expressed by the thoughtful that the Pigeons might be driven away. Extermination was not considered as a possibility, but it was felt that the harsh methods used to capture them might drive them to distant locations to roost and the local supply of fresh meat would not materialize.

Across the bay and to the north in Emmet County there was a much larger Pigeon roost, said to be forty-four miles long and

varying in width from three to ten miles. There the same intensive and hideous methods of snaring the birds were used with the addition of such other devices as inhuman—or human—ingenuity could invent. This site, vacated approximately in 1878, was said to have been the last nesting of the birds in their former roosts, although for many years afterward any hunter who took his gun and roamed the countryside over for many hours could generally bag a few birds. Local hunters in Leelanau County still boast, or did until recently, of Pigeons to be shot now and then and only last July (1933) while driving on a gravel highway near Northport I saw what I could almost have sworn was a Passenger Pigeon. It flew down from a beech tree by the roadside into a rut in the roadway then back again almost instantly as the car approached. Probably close inspection would have proven it to have been a Mourning Dove (*Zenaidura macroura carolinensis*).

What is the real reason why the Passenger Pigeon disappeared?

Indian lore related that the bird had been an important article of food from time immemorial. Their coming coincided almost with the end of the winter hunting season and the supply of fresh meat at that time of the year was welcome. Each hunter took as many birds as he needed to provide for his family at the time and a moderate supply to dry for a reserve against the day when famine might devastate the land. Being almost a nomadic race there was no need of carrying around a large supply of food for the woods were full of game, deer, bear, beaver, rabbit and other small animals, and the rivers and lakes were full of fish.

The Indians who live close to nature and have a knowledge of the ways of the wild that has never been mastered by the white man, used to come to my grandfather Smith, the first white settler and resident missionary in Northport, who was their teacher, preacher, lawyer, doctor and defender generally in all their troubles, and tell him that unless the Pigeons were given a chance to live undisturbed in their nesting places, that: "After awhile there will be no more Pigeons." That prophesy has come true.

My grandfather tried to convince the professional hunters that it might be well to let the birds alone one year then take them the next, thus becoming one of the early advocates of the "closed season." He also told them what several of the more intelligent Indians had said.

"Bosh" was their answer, "The Indians don't know any more about the Pigeons than we do—if as much." Then as an afterthought one added: "There'll be Pigeons as long as the world lasts." And the destruction continued.

The birds were fairly plentiful in Leelanau County in the late seventies and were also present in Emmet County at that time, but in the height of their breeding season in 1878 they were said to have left the latter roost and never returned. What became of them, where did they go?

Having no safe place upon which to rest even for a moment without the expectation of incredible cruelties, in fear and terror did they fly out over Lake Michigan and circle around distractedly until they dropped exhausted into the water?

Surely many perished in this manner, for one day in early summer we got up in the morning to find Grand Traverse Bay covered with dead Pigeons and the shore strewn with their bodies where the undulating back wash of the night had brought them in from the big lake. The night had been quiet. There had been no storm and no fog. Strong of wing summer storms never overcame them and the season of sleet storms had passed. True it had sometimes happened that small numbers of the birds had been lost in lake fogs, had flown around until their strength was spent, and had fallen and died; but there seemed to have been no possible cause for the death of so many.

Later in the day the merciful wind came up from the southwest and carried back to the bosom of the great lake the vast and silent caravan of gentle birds whose very attractiveness and usefulness had led to their extinction. Denied a foothold on the earth which was made for all creatures, without one safe spot on which they might rest, homes destroyed, their young killed, harassed and tormented on every side, had they in desperation flung themselves into the waters of oblivion?

But when the Indians saw them they said: "They have committed suicide. Their persecution was more than any living thing could endure."

*9077 Clarendon Ave., Detroit, Mich.*