

New children's book celebrates avian pal

By Robert Friedman

The “autobiography” of Pete the pigeon — who fluttered around Baltimore for a possible longevity record of 25 years before his burial in the Rosa Bonheur Memorial Park in Elkridge, Md. — is captured in a just-published children’s picture book.

Pete tells his tale in *The Autobiography of a Pigeon Named Pete*, which notes that the pigeon’s narrative was “interpreted” by Gary Meyers. The lovely illustrations are by Stephanie Helgeson.

Meyers is a retired Goddard Space Flight Center engineer whose mother’s home served as Pete’s residence when the pigeon wasn’t out and about. Meyers noted in a recent interview that the book was “the 100 percent true, real-life story” of the bird, whose life span was among the longest of his species.

(The 2014 *Guinness Book of World Records* lists Peace, a white ex-racing pigeon of Ashford Surrey, U.K., as the World’s Oldest Living Pigeon, having reached his 25th birthday on Feb. 1, 2014. It is unclear if Peace is still alive today. Your average “domesticated pigeon” lives up to 15 years, according to the Pigeon Control

Resource Center of Devon, England.)

A tale of the ‘30s and ‘40s

Meyers, 69, said that unfortunately he wasn’t yet born when Pete died in 1944. But the bird had spent the decades of the Roaring Twenties and the Depression-Era Thirties in and out of the South Baltimore home of Meyers’s grandfather Jesse Jones, a Baltimore and Ohio Railroad engineer. Meyers’ mother Muriel was Pete’s “person,” offering tender loving care to the bird during those years, he said.

Meyers said that details of Pete’s life and times were passed down by the family. His older sister, Eileen Meyers Donnelly, petted and played with Pete during the first 18 months of her life, until the pigeon passed away and was buried in the pet-and-people cemetery off U.S. 1 in Elkridge.

Meyers said the book also relies on stories about Pete published over the years in various Baltimore newspapers. Five of the stories, dating from 1933 to Pete’s passing in 1944, are reproduced in the book.

Among them is a report of how Pete, during his daily neighborhood walk, had once been picked up by a very hungry



PHOTO COURTESY OF GARY MEYERS

Gary Meyers’ new children’s book tells the tale of Pete the pigeon, a long-lived bird who was basically adopted by his family in the 1930s and ‘40s. Pete is buried in the Rosa Bonheur Memorial Park in Elkridge, which allows burial of both people and pets.

homeless man who was about to make the bird “the chief ingredient in a pigeon stew” until Muriel and her little sister, Lorraine, came upon the terrifying scene and ran for their father.

Jones reportedly “rescued Pete from the boiling pot in the nick of time.” The street guy was given enough money for

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several good meals, the story noted.

Meyers, who insisted he shouldn't be considered the book's author, said "Pete and my mom lived this book. It's their story, which I put together for my five grandchildren."

At rest in Elkridge

A memorial plaque for the pigeon is installed near the park's flagpole. It reads: "A Pigeon Named Pete, 1919-1944, from His Person, Muriel (Jones) Meyer."

The burial grounds made its own head-

lines in 1979 when it became the first pet cemetery in the world to allow humans to be buried alongside their pets. Estimates of human burials there range from 28 to as many as 100, along with some 8,000 pets.

The cemetery, which was opened in 1935, ceased burials in 2003, apparently due to legal problems and changes in ownership. Rumors were rife that land developers would dig up the animals and convert the well-located 11.5-acre burial site into a residential-shopping area, possibly replete with an outdoor mall, a gas station and a trailer park, along with the green space required for new Howard County developments.

Candy Warren, president of the Rosa Bonheur Society — a volunteer group that advocates for the continuation of the park as a pet-people cemetery, and makes weekly maintenance and cleanup visits to the site — said there was ample space for another 8,000 graves in the area.

Animals buried in Rosa Bonheur Memorial Park, named after the 19th century French artist known for her animal paintings, include: Gypsy Queen, a horse that visited all 48 states between 1925-1927; Mary Ann, the Baltimore Zoo's first elephant; Corporal Rex Ahlbin, a heroic World War II Doberman who served in combat

with the U.S. Marines; several mascot dogs of the then-named Washington Bullets basketball team; Pretty Boy Boyer, a parakeet with a 1,000-word vocabulary; and Willy, the canine companion of former Maryland Gov. William Donald Schaefer.

"We continue working to preserve the cemetery," Warren said, noting that both state and Howard County laws protect burials of humans and pets, which, hopefully, could prevent any developer from changing the cemetery's landscape.

Copies of *The Autobiography of a Pigeon Named Pete* can be ordered for \$14.95 from Amazon.com and BarnesandNoble.com.