

## "FOOLS WHO WANTED TO FLY"

Anyone who became interested in flying, when aviation was in its infancy, was ridiculed and considered a little "touched in the head." People were brutally frank, and did not hesitate to say that flying was just so much idiotic nonsense. They would ask what earthly good could come from it, and state that at best it could only be a rich man's toy. The pioneer had a hard, rough road to travel without any encouragement or consideration whatsoever. This is a fact, I know, because I once traveled this road.

What I have to relate here about my flying experience is what parallels, more or less, the experiences of other old timers. Remember, none of us knew anything about flying. We had no instructors to take us up, or teach us to fly. We had to stick our own necks out and learn to fly the hard way, and believe me, we all had our troubles and heartaches, mentally, physically, and financially.

Take Wilbur Wright, who made the first power flight covering a distance of 105 feet, lasting only  $3\frac{1}{2}$  seconds, which ended in a crash requiring two days for plane repairs. Orville Wright, his brother, also crashed, in which he received a compound fracture of the right thigh bone and two broken ribs. Bleriot, Farman, Ferber, and Breguit all had their discouragements and crack-ups.

Glenn Curtiss, one of the few old timers who made

a success out of flying, confided in me that he did not think the game was worth all the worry and chances one had to take, and he for one, was sorry he ever became involved in it. Yet his exhibition flights netted him sums well up in six figures. Glenn Martin, one of my old buddies, made a greater success out of aviation with less trouble attached to his endeavors than any of the others but it nearly broke his heart when they grounded him because of insurance.

Charley Walsh and Frank Stites, two fine boys, paid the supreme penalty, and Waldo Waterman, a glutton for punishment, is still fooling around with old man destiny. He has been flying longer than any other pilot with a Commercial Pilot License in the United States.

From these and the rest of the self-taught flyers, comes the real pioneers of aviation, and all the rest of the aviators down to the present time, have received their flying instructions from this small nucleus of self-taught flyers, or their flying descendants.

My first interest in aviation started one morning in San Diego, way back in 1909. L. A. Blockman, my banker, pointed to a French newspaper lying on his desk, which showed some pictures of a new Farman biplane. He said, "There now, is the coming thing. Let's build one. I'll put in with you." So, that is the way it all got started. I guess he was not as enthusiastic as I, because he pulled out soon after trouble started, which probably

showed superior judgment on his part.

We started work from scratch, our only blueprints being the four French newspaper pictures, which we went by, and guessed at the measurements. After six months time, with the expenditure of much money, we produced something which resembled a Farman biplane.

It was constructed with sticks, cloth, and wire, yet it boasted of being the first plane to ever use aluminum castings. It had a contraption sticking out ten feet in front acting as an elevator, and the tail looked like a box kite with swinging doors in between, for rudders. The workmanship was good, and I felt quite proud of it, but the people, as they looked it over, shook their heads saying, "You know, that fellow ought to have his head examined."

When the plane was finished, we dismantled it and shipped it to some open acreage back of Imperial Beach, a little community about 12 miles south of San Diego. There we put up a tent hangar and made a runway. We had to rope off around the hangar to keep the people out. This they resented, and became somewhat hostile toward us. Many remarks were made, such as "Why in hell do nuts like these have to come to Imperial Beach with their crazy fool flying ideas." One old lady said, "You know, this whole thing is wicked, because, if God had intended men to fly, he would have given them wings. No good will come from this, you mark my word." Others said, "Let's stick around,

it might be fun to see him break his fool neck."

Through all this, day by day, work progressed. We installed a worked-over Camron automobile engine, and hung our gas tanks. Our landing gear was a honey. It somewhat resembled snow skis, on which two motor cycle wheels were attached by thick rubber bands, acting as shock absorbers.

During assembly, a funny thing happened. We had a young colored roustabout, who was instructed to take one of the lower wing sections back to the hangar. He held it by the center beam over his head, so it would not drag on the ground, and as he was thus carrying it, a big gust of wind caught it, head on, and lifted him ten feet in the air before he could let loose.

Boy! Was he scared, he almost turned white. As the story got around, the people said, "Gee, maybe the gosh darn thing will fly after all." From then on, we received a little more respect from the natives, and their daily attendance increased.

After many delays, the day came when we wheeled it out on the runway for the tryout. I would gladly have given almost anything for a ten minute flight, just to receive that first startling sensation of flying, so I could feel and know what to expect when I went up alone. I was not afraid, but still there was that awful anxiety of not knowing what was really going to happen, whether it was going to be a cheer, the hospital, or the morgue.

At night, previous to this tryout, I had been going

down to the hangar, when everyone was gone, and I would crawl up in the seat and make believe I was up in the air flying, and I would work the controls back and forth, to become thoroughly familiar with them. I studied the situation over very carefully, and realized that there were two very important problems which I would have to master, and master very quickly after leaving the ground.

First, I would have to adjust myself quickly to an entirely new sensation, that of flying, also so that of height, and I must utterly disregard the feeling of fear. Second, to quickly study the behavior of the plane in the air, so I could learn how to control it before it could pile itself up on the ground, with me probably underneath.

As the word got around that the tryout was about to take place, the people came to be a hinderance, and we had to postpone the flight until the next day. Next morning, as I climbed up into the seat, I became extremely nervous, but when the engine started, the nervousness left me instantly. As I warmed up the engine, I said to myself, "Well, this is it," and started off down the runway.

When I got going as fast as I could, I pulled back on the stick, and to my great astonishment, nothing happened. We tried it again and again, always with the same results. We changed this, and we changed that, we built a larger propeller, we set the engine back to change the center of gravity, we set out wings at a different

angle, matter of fact, we changed everything we could think of, and during all these changes we practically wore out the tires and the runway, but to no avail. The darn thing just would not leave the ground.

It got so, that I was ashamed to go to the little community store, as they would always rib me with the same old question, "What's the matter? Can't you make it fly?" Well, we wore ourselves out, and the natives too, for only a few now ever came down to see us.

After fiddling around for weeks, we decided we needed more power, so I ordered a new engine. It was a six cylinder, two cycle, with two carburetors, and the exhaust show straight out from the cylinders. The noise was terrific, but it turned the propeller over about 400 more revolutions per minute.

When everything was installed and adjusted, we wheeled it out, and I gave it the gun. With greater power, I went down the runway much faster than before. When I pulled back the stick, up she went, about seven feet, and would not go any higher. (Later, the boys said my tail skid was dragging and never left the ground.)

I tried to keep the plane so it would go straight down the runway, but the wind was coming in almost at right angles and it blew me off course. I thought I was tipping so I used my ailerons, and then I really did tip, so much that the end of the wing hit the ground and spun me around, bouncing me out in a patch of cactus.

Needless to say, I spent the next several hours with the wife, who was using a pair of pliers to pull the cactus needles out of my hind end. From that experience, I learned the difference between a slip and a drift.

The next few days we made repairs and adjustments, and were ready to take off again. My next tryout was my first flight, one of the strangest I think that ever happened. I went up, but I never came down. I got stuck up in the air. Believe it or not.

On this flight I ran along the ground for a long way before I pulled her up, and when I did, Oh Boy! how I shot up! I went up 100 feet before I knew it. I was headed straight for the beach and over some houses. I was not exactly scared, but things did not seem just right because there was no runway under me.

I tried to turn before I got out over the water, but could not, because everytime I tried, I almost tipped over sideways. I knew nothing about banking on turns. I wanted to sit upright and not be tipped over at an angle, but I gradually coaxed it around, and made a great circle. To get back to my runway, I had to fly over some tall trees, and as I was skimming over them, I instantly slowed up. I heard several big bangs, and the next thing I knew, I pancaked down on some orange trees with the engine and propeller still turning over.

There were three trees under the wings and one each, supporting the elevator and tail. A perfect tree landing

if there is such a thing.

There I sat in the plane, perched up high on top of the trees. It was at least ten minutes before anybody came, then the whole community arrived. The boys had to get a ladder to get me down. The dismantling of the plane and getting the engine down was some job, and we found, to our surprise, there was nothing broken or damaged!

The trouble lay with my skid, catching under some telephone wires which I did not see, and the force snapped off four telephone poles. Later, when I phoned the telephone company and told the manager what had happened, and that I was willing to pay for the damage, he told me I was crazy. He hung up, and that was the last I ever heard about it.

This flight changed everything immediately. From a crazy nut, I became a hero. The natives who criticized us, now went out of their way to do things for us. The kids would follow me around, like I was something out of a circus. Gee! What a little success will go for a fellow.

After the news got around that I could really fly, we had crowds all day long, and on Sundays, thousands came down from San Diego.

In later flights, I learned to bank and make right and left turns. One of my mistakes in learning to fly, was using too much movement in handling the controls. They answered slowly, but were extremely sensitive.

In the meantime, Charley Walsh moved down to Imperial

Beach and shared my runway. He had a biplane, of his own construction, similar to a Curtiss. He encountered the same trouble as I had, not enough power. He was not in a position to buy a new engine, so on Sundays when the crowd came down, I would fly and the hat was passed to help buy one.

The Roy Knabenshue Cup, the most coveted trophy of the Aero Club of California, was offered to the first California aviator who could fly a distance of 1000 feet in a California built machine.

On September 9, 1910, I flew and won the cup, and later I was presented with a gold plaque commemorating that occurrence.

After I acquired more flying experience, the boys that worked for me began to beg me to take them up. So I put a seat on the wing, and the extra weight of a passenger did not seem to make much difference.

One day a young man and woman came over to the hangar. The lady was very much interested, and wanted me to take her up. I refused, but the young man was insistent. He said that she had just completed a trans-continental run in an automobile, for which he had the agency. It would be good publicity for her, and he was quite persuasive. I finally agreed. When everything was ready, just before the engine started, I felt a vibration that shook the whole plane. I wondered what it was, and discovered to my astonishment, that my lady passenger was doing the shaking.

I said, "Lady, you had better not go up if it affects you that way". She smiled and said, "I am not scared. I am just timid, so let's go." I gave it the gun, and Blanch Stuart Scott, who later became the first professional woman airplane pilot in America, had her first airplane ride. Glenn L. Martin, the famous airplane manufacturer was the persuasive young man who had the automobile agency in Santa Ana.

I stayed around Imperial Beach for a while, carrying passengers, and when I heard about the big Los Angeles meet to be held at Dominguez Field, I moved up to compete for the prizes.

Latham and his Antionette, and I with my Farman, occupied the same tent hangar. One day, as we were out in front, I saw a Curtiss plane diving straight for us. I started to run, but Latham grabbed me. If he had not, I would not be writing this article today, because the plane crashed about where I would have been, had not Latham held me back. From where we stood, we thought the pilot surely must have been killed, but the people on the other side of the crash said the pilot, Lincoln Beachy, came out of the plane like a ball, when it hit, and rolled along the ground for about 50 feet, got up, dusted himself off, and said "Gee, that was a close one." He had several other crack-ups after that, but stuck to it, and became one of the world's best pilots, and was the first aviator that ever looped the loop or flew upside down.

On the first day of the meet, my luck ran out on me. While rounding the field, I hit a small air pocket, side-slipped, and crashed. The next day I must have been looking terribly discouraged, because Dick Ferris, the promoter of the meet, came over and slipped me \$500, saying, "You've had hard luck so take this, it will help some on repairs". As I left him, and was going back across the field to my hangar, I noticed a Wright plane, volplaning down at a very steep angle, and I wondered why the pilot did not pull out before coming so close to the ground. He never did, and crashed about 150 feet from me. After the dust cleared, I found there was nothing I could do for him. So the few minutes I had before the crowd came, I used in looking for the trouble. I found a flaw in one of the chain links that operated the elevators. There never was an examination or investigation of this accident because the people stormed the field, and souvenir hunters practically pulled the plane apart and packed it away before they could be stopped. The pilot was Arch Hoxsey, one of Wright's best flyers, who lost his life in that accident on December 31, 1910.

After the meet, Didier Masson, a little Frenchman who came over from France with Louis Paulhan, wanted to team up with someone to go on a barn-storming tour. We made arrangements and our first stop was Bisbee, Arizona, where we used the Bisbee Country Club for our field. The admission was one dollar, but only a few tickets were sold, as

thousands had grand-stand seats on the surrounding hills. There we pulled a stunt. Masson smuggled a box of cigars from Maco, Mexico into the United States. It was the first time anything was ever smuggled by airplane.

The exhibition was a flop financially. The only thing which saved us from the Sheriff, was the passenger carrying flights. We set our price at one hundred dollars a ride. On account of the altitude of Bisbee, we did not care for passenger flights, but it turned out that we had many, and even had to stay over the next day to complete the rides. The strange thing about it, was that all our passengers were either bartenders or sporting women.

Our next stop was Globe, Arizona, where we did better, but the expense of setting up and taking down, and with rail transportation, which was almost prohibitive, we found we were making money backwards fast. So, after a few more stops we decided to ship back to Los Angeles.

When we returned, we were surprised to learn that Los Angeles had become air-minded, and very tolerant towards the fools who wanted to fly. This tolerance and encouragement that was being shown, was the big factor in making Los Angeles the world's greatest aviation center.

It is strange how people will condemn any new thing, which they know nothing about, yet will quickly change and sing its praises, when its hard journey up the pioneer road has ended.

I presume we must accept this condition, because the

telegraph, the telephone, the railroad, the steamboat, the submarine, the automobile, the moving picture, and most everything else that amounted to anything, had to all struggle up this difficult road before becoming a success.

The one thing that I see, which is entirely wrong about this plan, is the time element, which eliminates the poor ridiculed pioneer, who seldom has his chance of getting even with that old saying -- See, you block head, I told you so.

B F Roeding