

THEY WANTED WINGS
CHAPTER ONE
1910-1919

WHO WERE THE FIRST TO FLY IN DOOR COUNTY?

Many of our visitors to Door County fly here. For at least 70 years, they've flown into such airfields and airstrips as the ones at Ephraim, Chambers Island, Washington Island, Egg Harbor, Valmy, as well as the Cherryland Airport when it was located on Highway 57 and after it moved to County Highway C. But when did this interest in aviation in Door County get started?

As far as can be determined, the first time an airplane took off and flew in Door County, Wisconsin, was on Thursday, September 19, 1912. The flight was made by the famous barnstorming pilot, Lincoln Beachey. This was just nine years after the first powered flight by the Wright brothers; at Kitty Hawk, North Carolina.

Beachey and his flimsy, paper-covered biplane were brought to Door County as a promotional stunt for the Door County Fair. The late Art Moeller remembered when the crated parts of Beachey's plane were unloaded at the railroad station and hauled by horses and wagon out to the fairgrounds, past his father's business, Moeller's Garage.

"Airship Saves the Fair" read the headline in one of the local newspapers, the Advocate, a week after the demonstration. Despite the rain that fell in torrents, the grandstand was filled and the audience was thrilled by Beachey's daring air show.

The weather was better the next day, and the show was even better, as Beachey swooped down in front of the grandstand, then pulled up just in time to clear the ground. He ended his show early on Friday. The parts of the biplane were crated up again and taken back to the train depot to be shipped to Chicago for a Saturday show. Beachey himself was driven to Green Bay by automobile, which was quite a feat in 1912. In Green Bay, he caught a passenger train to Chicago.

The state of the art of airplane building wasn't quite up to the strain Beachey put on them; in 1914, his plane broke up over San Francisco Bay and he was killed.

In 1913, the Door County Fair Association hired another famous stunt pilot, Louis Gerston, to put on an air show at the Door County Fair. The show was a success, but the Fair Association decided the airplane flights were getting to be "old hat" and they'd try something different the next year.

Meanwhile, World War I started, in 1914, and the airplane began to be improved rapidly. Even the Russian czar built up an air force before he was deposed by the communists in 1917. The major countries developed an air force that was an individual branch of the military; but the United States kept its military aviation as part of the army until end of World War II.

BARNSTORMING SHOWS, WORLD WAR I SPURRED INTEREST IN FLYING

No doubt the flying shows at the Door County Fair of Lincoln Beachey in 1912 and Louis Gerston in 1913 inspired some Door County people to learn to fly. Among them probably was Karl S. Reynolds, who was very instrumental in developing aviation in Door County. He was 12 years old when Beachey put on his air show.

Another may have been a young man who grew up in Gardner township, Victor T. Dewarzegger, who later attended medical school and became the first flying doctor from Door County. He shortened his name to Dewar, and did most of his flying in Colorado, so you probably haven't heard of him unless you knew him. Dr. Dewar was ten years old when Beachey put on his stunt show at the Door County Fair.

Dr. Dan Dorchester, of course, was Door County's best known flying doctor, and he was another one of Door County pioneers in flight. "Dr. Dan" might have been inspired to learn to fly by seeing one of those early flights, for he was at a very impressionable age, almost seven years old, when Beachey flew at the Door County Fair.

We can only speculate about who was inspired to learn to fly by these early air shows, the first put on only nine years after the first flight of the Wright brothers at Kitty Hawk. One might wonder, "Was anyone from Door County inspired to be a pilot in the first World War?"

Formerly, that information could be found by checking the military discharge records in the courthouse. But with the institution of privacy of information acts, that can no longer be done. So the best sources of information are the files of the Door County Advocate, which can be best found in the Laurie Room at the Door County library. The Advocate published not only stories about those serving in the military, but also short stories about their discharge telling when, where and in what branch they served.

Most Door County soldiers served in the army, in the infantry, many of them initially in Company F, organized in Sturgeon Bay by

Captain Edward Reynolds. But several found their way into the American Aviation Corps.

Two of them were Joseph Zivney and Ernest Jackson, both well-known residents of Sturgeon Bay. They became mechanics in the American Aviation Corps. After being discharged, Zivney became a Standard Oil employee and delivered gasoline throughout Door County. Ernie Jackson became the owner of an automobile dealership, along with Clarence Kostka, another flying enthusiast. Jackson and Zivney were stationed at Elliston Field and came home for a furlough in January of 1919, and expected to be discharged soon afterward.

Raymond Houle of Sturgeon Bay did become a flier in World War I. Born at the turn of the century, Houle tried to enlist in the American Aviation Corps, but was unable to meet the requirements. Undaunted by the turndown, he traveled to Duluth, Minnesota, represented himself as a Canadian citizen, and enlisted in the Royal Flying Corps.

"Bud" Houle was accepted and sent to the University of Toronto to take a course in aviation. His training in flight began with an instructor, and he did well enough to be able to solo and fly on his own.

Houle was a daring, devil-may-care young man, and he liked to do air stunts, most of which would have put him in good form to have "dog fights" with the Germans overseas. But one day he met with an accident in training that almost cost him his life.

Bud was flying almost 3,000 feet in the air when his plane got out of control and his plane plunged to the ground and broke up. He suffered a broken right ankle, an injured hip and breastbone and a blow alongside his left temple that caused an injury to his eyesight.

Houle was taken to the hospital, where it was discovered he wasn't even a Canadian citizen. He was promptly discharged and he returned to Sturgeon Bay, unsure if he'd ever get any recognition for volunteering. At last reports, on October 25, 1918, he still walked with a limp and had difficulty seeing with his left eye, but his injuries were getting better slowly.

No trace has been found of what happened to Raymond Houle; evidently, he left Door County. There is no obituary for him in the Advocate files. Maybe that's because he's still living, somewhere, at the age of 96 or 97, after being spared death after plunging from the skies.

Two World War I pilots could have been born in Door County. They were Rolland and Merrill Riddick, sons of the Carl Riddicks, who moved from Sturgeon Bay around 1900. Their mother was born in the Town of Egg Harbor in 1873. Research indicates they were born

elsewhere. Rolland C. Riddick wrote a letter to his parents concerning his wartime aviation antics and it was sent to the Advocate by B. J. Keith, an uncle who was president of the Sawyer Branch of the Bank of Sturgeon Bay:

“Yesterday, we worked all day and night, using the headlights of cars and lanterns, to assemble airplanes for the front. (There were no trans-Atlantic flights until 1927, so airplane parts were shipped overseas by boat and the planes were assembled in France.) One of my men worked at the job all night, until he fell asleep. When I woke him up, he was shivering and blue with cold. “I never realized until recently what a wonderful way to travel the airship offers,” continued Riddick, and then he goes on to tell how he made use of flying for his own pleasure, even though it was while the war was going on.

Riddick then tells about hearing a rumor that his brother was stationed at another airfield. Despite the foggy weather, and lack of any air to ground communication, he took off and landed at the field where his brother was reported to be stationed.

Sneaking up to a bunk which he thought was his brother’s, he swatted the rear of the covered-up figure with a board and jumped on the person. A red-headed man got up and asked, “What the hell is all this rough-house about?” It wasn’t his brother, but his brother soon walked in and they had a joyous reunion.

Whether the Riddicks returned to Sturgeon Bay to visit their relatives, the Keiths, we don’t know.

Another possibility of a World War I Door County aviator was Lt. Col. Thomas Cassidy, born in the Town of Egg Harbor on August 3, 1896. He was a descendant of Owen Cassidy, and in his later years, owned a home on the shoreline between Egg Harbor and Horseshoe Bay. But research proves that, although he was in the United States Air Force during World War II, and even flew jets, he had been in the coast guard in World War I.

The question remains, “Were there any other aviators in Door County before or during World War I?” Perhaps someone reading this knows the answer.

INTEREST IN AVIATION INCREASED AFTER WORLD WAR I

World War I ended on November 11, 1918, with the signing of the Armistice with Germany. The veterans were returning home to Door County. But the financial indebtedness of the war still had to be paid. Therefore, in April of 1919, a Victory Loan drive found its way

to Sturgeon Bay, by way of the railroad, which had only been established 26 years before.

The War Relic train sent out by the Seventh Federal Reserve District arrived in Sturgeon Bay on April 15, 1919, accompanied by veterans of the war, a naval band, politicians and all sorts of war souvenirs from both sides of the conflict. A large group of spectators from all over the county gathered to see the war relics and listen to speakers who urged them to "Finish the job," and buy Victory bonds to help pay the cost of winning the war. One of the relics on display was the fuselage of a German Fokker fighter plane that had been shot down.

It should be noted that nearly all of the American flyers in World War I flew either British or French airplanes. The only American plane used was the Curtiss JN-4 Jenny, and it was a training plane, deemed the best of its kind at the time. But the Jenny wasn't a fighting plane. American pilots flew the French Nieuport-27, the British Sopwith Camel, the French Spad and the French Nieuport-28.

The Germans flew Fokker fighters like the one brought in on the War Relic train in 1919, developed by a Hollander, Tony Fokker. It was Fokker into whose hands fell a French plane in 1915 that had a shielding device that enabled the pilot to fire his machine gun through his propeller blades. Fokker further improved the device by linking the oil pump of the Fokker E.1 to its machine gun. Thus, the machine gun fired when the propeller was not in the line of fire.

By 1917, the British had developed the Vickers machine gun, patterned after one found in a captured German plane. The Sopwith Camel then became a more than worthy opponent of the Fokker planes, and the one in the Sturgeon Bay parade was an example of one of many shot down by British and American pilots.

A week later, on April 26, 1919, another landmark in Door County aviation occurred; the first seaplane, or hydroplane as it was called then, landed in the bay of Sturgeon Bay. Again, this was part of the Victory Loan Drive. A big celebration, which included the launching of a tug at the Leathem and Smith yards, was planned by Chairman Bill Wagener.

But the seaplane didn't arrive on Friday as scheduled. Scheduled to fly up from Milwaukee, it experienced engine trouble. But about 1000 people at least enjoyed the ship launching.

Wagener received a message at noon Saturday that the plane would arrive about 4 p.m. on Saturday, but by that time the committee was skeptical as to whether the Milwaukee office would keep its promise. The seaplane did arrive, and word quickly spread around town about its arrival. Mistakenly, Lt. Applegate landed the plane on

the Sawyer side, and a big group rushed to the Fourth ward to see the plane. The "Peace", as the hydroplane was named, had a wingspan of about 50 feet and used a Liberty engine of 100 horsepower. It was equipped with pontoons which enabled it to land on water.

After taking on gasoline and oil, Lt. Applegate and his mechanic took off for Green Bay, where they put on their next exhibition, leaving Sturgeon Bay at 5:10 p.m. and arriving in Green Bay at 5:45. They flew straight down the bay at an altitude of 200 feet, giving many Door, Kewaunee and Brown county residents what may have been their first view of an airplane.

The August 8, 1919, Advocate, told about a revival on the part of the Door County Fair Association of an interest in aviation. On the last day of the fair, September 11, an airplane owned by the Milwaukee Journal was scheduled to put on an air circus. The Journal was to furnish movies of the plane in action to publicize the event. Each person entering the fairgrounds was to be given a ballot on which they would nominate a man and a woman to receive a free ride in the airplane. The plane would also race a car for several laps around the track.

"Brownie," the automobile editor of the Milwaukee Journal, came to Sturgeon Bay the week before the fair to select a landing place at the fairgrounds for the "Flying Squirrel" to land. A spot just south of the grandstand was chosen. The pilot had just returned from a tour of duty with the aviation section of the U. S. Army in World War I.

Plans were made to cover the Door County Fair by the Milwaukee Journal, with moving pictures being taken, and reports being sent back to Milwaukee from the airplane by wireless (radio) back to Milwaukee. This, of course, was several years before the Journal station, WTMJ, went on the air, and the same year the first station in the nation, WHA in Madison, started broadcasting as a service of the University of Wisconsin. There were no commercial stations on the air, and no home broadcast receivers around. The radio communications were simply a source of information for the newspaper.

The Advocate reporter wrote: "With the present day interest in things pertaining to aviation, no plan could be devised for a fair exhibition that would be of greater interest than exhibition flying in charge of a pilot capable of demonstrating all that an airplane can be made to do. The plane will demonstrate the wonderful control that science has made possible in the handling of an air machine, showing the tricks taught army pilots that they might outwit enemy airmen."

Now, remember that statement was made just 16 years after the Wright brothers made their first flight at Kitty Hawk, North Carolina. What a tremendous advance had been made in aviation because of World War I!

A committee consisting of William Jess of Washington Island, Ralph Jenquin of Gardner, William Bastar of Forestville, Charles Mathiason of Clay Banks and William Moore of Nasewaupee had been appointed to take charge of the election of the man and woman to receive free airplane rides. Nominations were to be made at either of the two newspaper offices in the city (the Advocate and the News). At the fair on September 11, fair goers could vote for the persons of their choice.

There was plenty of publicity in the Door County Advocate, both in news articles and paid advertisements for that first post-war fair in 1919. A carnival was signed up less than two weeks before the fair opened; today, carnivals are signed up many months in advance. The big ad placed by Fair President Henry Hahn and Fair Secretary Earl M. "Mitch" LaPlant included a plug for the air show: "See the airplane race the auto; watch the dare devil feats performed in the air. One of the most spectacular 'stunts' of the fair is the flying exhibition demonstrating the wonderful control that science has made possible in the handling of an airplane and showing tricks taught army pilots that might outwit enemy airplanes."

A week before the fair, Door County got a glimpse of another "hydroplane." The Isle of Luzon, the largest seaplane on the Great Lakes, flew over Sturgeon Bay en route from Milwaukee to Green Bay, where it took on passengers. The plane was the property of Triangle Airways Corporation, and it was considering stationing a flying boat at Green Bay to take passengers to various points on the lake and bay. For publicity purposes very likely, they made a pass over Sturgeon Bay and Oconto.

The Advocate of Friday, September 12, reported on the three day fair, held Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday of that week: "High winds interfered with the performance of the airplane and the race between the automobile and airplane was not as interesting as it might have been, due to the fact that the plane could not hug the earth, being forced to fly several hundred feet above the track. The aviator's stunt flying was confined to a couple of loops and banking."

But the winners of the contest did get their ride in the airplane. Allison Hilton, son of Dr. G. F. Hilton, made flights of 20 minutes and after the wind died down, the female winner, Katherine Boyd, was given her ride. Katherine, by the way, lived to see many things in her

life; another World War, space exploration, television; she lived until just a few years ago.