

THEY WANTED WINGS  
CHAPTER TWO  
1920-1929

TWENTIES SAW BUILDING OF AIRSTRIPS, AIRPORTS

Just three months before the beginning of the "Roaring Twenties," on October 3, 1919, the Door County Democrat reported what could well have become the county's first air tragedy.

"Bo" Andersen from the Idabo Inn on Washington Island reported the story.

"Washington Island was treated to a regular thriller and not a movie thriller either," wrote Andersen, a correspondent for the Advocate. "Saturday, September 27th, at 10:30 a.m., the steamer Search of Detroit Harbor (Washington Island) picked up a balloon and two men in Death's Door and brought them safe into Detroit Harbor, basket, balloon, instruments and all."

Three army and three navy balloons were engaged in a race to see how far they could get from St. Louis and no. 51, based at Langley Field, VA, had been blown off course. They had dumped all but six bags of ballast to stay aloft over Marinette and the crew of two army men and their balloon suddenly dropped into the water.

Fearing the deflated balloon would drag them beneath the waters, the men were glad to see the Search hove into view, with Captain Pat Chambers at the helm.

Chambers had been lifting his fish nets, but he stopped immediately and headed for the balloon. The army men motioned the Search to go on the weather side, so the sparks from the steamer would not ignite the explosive hydrogen gas escaping from the balloon.

The balloonists were pulled aboard the Search and the balloon dragged to Detroit Harbor. Captain Chambers dried the men out at his home, and they telegraphed back to St. Louis to tell what had happened.

Said reporter Andersen, "Many people went out to see the air ship and the captain and lieutenant were kept busy explaining aeronautics to the visitors. To say they were both grateful for the help as well as the good treatment received from the Chambers family is putting it mildly. They were profuse in their thanks."

As if to make the pilots feel better about the downing of their air ship, Andersen added, "It is believed the no. 51 won the race from St. Louis as its descent to earth was the farthest from St. Louis of any of the balloons entered in the race."

An article in the July 30, 1920, Door County Advocate tells how the "Roaring Twenties" era of aviation was ushered into Door County. Within months of the beginning of the "Lawless Decade," while Al Capone was discovering that the nation's thirst for alcohol had not dried up with the passing of the Volstead Act, Door County was beginning to enter the "Air Age."

For probably the second time since Lincoln Beachey and other aviators landed at the Door County fair airstrip, a landing was planned for an airstrip at what was then the Borchert Farm, across from what is now Zahn's Green Thumb.

Plans were being made for the airplane owned by the Green Bay Aero Club, established in 1919, to land at the Borchert Farm on a Saturday, stay through Monday and Tuesday of the next week and take up passengers for a fee and drop advertising literature.

The owner of the nearby Motor Inn, T.F. Caffee, took reservations for the flight, with Wilfred G. Moore, a two-year veteran of the British Flying Corps in World War I, as pilot. Moore had also been acting flight commander of the 29th Squadron, one of the most famous fighting squadrons of the British army.

Also, in late August of 1920, a seaplane from the Great Lakes Naval Station in northern Illinois came as far north as the canal on a photographing and survey trip. Then, the first week in September, Lt. Col. Farwell flew up from Great Lakes with a big HS1 seaplane to get photos of the lighthouses, suitable landing places and to find out where gasoline and oil might be obtained for airplanes.

This seaplane boasted a 400-horsepower Liberty engine, a speed of 80 m.p.h. and the capability of reaching Washington Island in a little over three hours from Great Lakes. The seaplane could reach Gills Rock in ten minutes from Sturgeon Bay.

Lt. Farwell had intended to land at Washington Island on Friday night, but darkness prevented that, so he decided to land at Gills Rock but he had difficulty landing.

Said the Advocate writer, "Commander Farwell stated that they were greatly indebted to Jacob Johnson of Gills Rock. After they had taxied as near shore as was safe because of rocks, Mr. Johnson came to their rescue in a boat, towed the machine to shore, took care of them overnight and refused all pay the next morning. Further, during the night there was a storm and Mr. Johnson undertook to awaken the men every two hours in order that they might see how the plane was weathering it."

Jake Johnson, by the way, was one of the brave men, along with Marvin Daubner, who, in 1935, walked out to Death's Door on the ice,

to find out where the six Washington Island young men had gone through the ice with their car and drowned.

Early Saturday morning, the plane flew across to Washington Island and, after making the necessary survey, the crew visited Camp Pan Hellanic, the girl's camp conducted by matrons from Great lakes. All the girls were from the naval station.

A head wind bucked the seaplane on its trip back to Sturgeon Bay on Saturday afternoon, where they landed at 3 p.m. The pilot had called ahead for the Standard Oil truck to deliver oil and gasoline. The truck was waiting for them on their arrival, and they took on 80 gallons of gasoline.

The pilot had planned to make a quick flight back to Great Lakes, but he was hampered in getting going, because on Friday night at Gills Rock, the pontoons had scraped bottom on the rocks, causing a leak that let in water. That made the plane so heavy they had trouble lifting off. Also, the engine bucked so badly, the ship had to land on the bay after takeoff on Washington Island and be towed back to shore by a fishing tug. The pilot finally took off for Great Lakes at 5 p.m.

The same weekend, the airplane from the Green Bay Aero club made a flight up to North Bay to look for the remains of the steamer O'Conner, which had sunk the year before. There being no place in that swampy area to land, they abandoned the project, expecting that the search would be resumed by a seaplane from Great Lakes.

We get an insight into where some of the first landing strips in Door County were, from a May 13, 1921, Advocate article. Harry G. Smith, a former army pilot from Menominee, Michigan, had bought an airplane and started taking passengers up for \$10 for a fifteen minute ride. In the spring of 1921, he had landed at Algoma, Kewaunee, Maplewood and Forestville and plied his trade. All that was needed to land was a level cow pasture with the stones cleared off.

The May 21, 1921, Door County Advocate told of a Belgian aviator who visited in the Brussels and Union area. He had enlisted in the Belgian infantry in 1914, at the beginning of World War I, and within a year had become the pilot of Belgian airplane no. 8 and was given a commission. On August 29, 1916, he shot down two German planes and a German dirigible with a crew of 23 German officers. Six weeks later, he made another attack.

"Surrounded by seven German machines," said the Advocate writer, "he was seriously wounded, receiving three bullets in his head, a bullet in each arm and another in his hip. His machine fell from a distance of 2,000 feet and although he escaped death, he fell into enemy lines and was a prisoner for 12 months."

His body bore the marks of seven wounds, three shrapnel wounds and marks caused by poison gas. He was decorated by both the Belgian and French governments. The reasons for his visit to Southern Door County remains a mystery. He may have had relatives there.

Two well-known air heros, John Miller and Ed LaParle passed over Sturgeon Bay in June of 1923. A few months before, they had flown to Fox Island, (probably the one in Alaska), where many islanders, isolated from the mainland, were running out of food and supplies. This time, they had been chartered by Alvin Ross, auditor of the Economy Fuse Company of Chicago to look for the drowned bodies of two resort owner relatives of Ross's at Trout Lake, Wisconsin.

Already, Chicago's Edgewater Beach Hotel had a hotel air service where people could charter a plane. Later, as we will see, a well-known Door County resort owner would get the idea of setting up an air strip, but that idea was thwarted by the Great Depression.

An airplane flight over Door County was still big enough news to be printed in the Door County News in September of 1924. "An airplane believed to be bound for points in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan passed over this town on Tuesday," said the writer in the Advocates's competitor. "It passed so high, however, that we were unable to get a good view of it."

#### WOODRUFF PLANNED TO FLY GUESTS TO RESORT

In 1925, according to a May 1 issue of the Advocate, a resort owner conceived the idea of building an airport at Ephraim. J. V. Woodruff, a former stunt pilot, was in the process of building a resort in the town, and he expressed his reason for building an airport in this way: "My aim is to advertise the town, and not only my hotel. The chief thing is to get people here. It is for the benefit of all that they go to the hotel they like the best."

Woodruff planned to carry passengers to Ephraim, and hoped to get permission to land at Peninsula State Park, on the golf course. Failing that, he said he'd buy a sea plane that could land on the beach in front of his hotel.

Mr. Woodruff had a great deal of experience in the field of flying, according to the Advocate article. He'd done stunt flying and advertising throughout the East as "Jimmy Woodruff's Flying Circus". His wife had recently sold her interest in a hotel in Springfield, Illinois, in order to invest in her husband's new enterprise, the Lakeshore Resort.

The hotel was being built on his wife's family's, the Zachariasons', property, near the head of the bay. It and several cottages were lighted by a Kohler light plant, while many resorts still were lit by kerosene lamps. Woodruff was up with and ahead of the times; he even planned to build a service station for automobiles.

By July, Woodruff had expanded his plans to build his airport between Ephraim and Sister Bay, on the Fichtner property on Highway 17 (now Highway 42). Fictner's field was directly north across Highway 42 from Fieldcrest Road in Sister Bay. In the late 1920s or early 1930s, LaReine Logerquist saw Howard Hughes, with his leather puttees and leather aviator's cap, spin the propeller of his plane and take off. He missed getting a ride with the future builder of the Spruce Goose by a few minutes. An exhibition of flying was set for July 19, a Sunday, with Dan Morgan of Green Bay demonstrating parachute jumping from the plane at a height of 3000 feet over Ephraim. Since the chances of landing in the water were great, boats would be ready to rescue him. Other stunts would include the whiplash and tailspin. The plane was to be a Curtiss Wright, piloted by K. Hughes, an ace flier from Wyoming.

The plane had been flown up from St. Louis to the Borchert field across from the present-day Zahn's Green Thumb north of Sturgeon Bay on Highways 17-78 (42-57 today). While there, the pilot took Mayor Jim Martin, David Nebel and Herb Reynolds for a ride.

The next week a five passenger Hisco Standard was to be flown up to take care of summer passengers. The Woodruff field was to be run in conjunction with Ebert's Flying Circus field, formerly Hamilton Flying Field in Milwaukee. Woodruff's plan was to fly passengers up on a regular daily schedule. Big ideas for the times!

But when the 19th rolled around, the parachutist, Dan Morgan of Green Bay, decided not to jump, due a high wind. K. Hughes, the pilot, agreed with Morgan's decision, saying that a jump was extremely dangerous, given the rough waters of the bay and stands of heavy timber under the jump site.

Said Hughes, "It was raining at 1800 feet and there was also a 45 m.p.h. wind. In that wind, it is doubtful if the parachute would open." The thousands of people gathered to see the parachute jump were disappointed, but Woodruff said the jump would be attempted again the following Sunday.

Omar Goserud of Sturgeon Bay held the lucky ticket entitling him either to an airplane ride or the price of it; but instead of seeing Door County from the clouds, as the Advocate writer put it, he chose the five-dollar bill. Several other people paid to get an airplane ride.

Edward Smith's farm, east of Ephraim, had been chosen as the landing field, instead of the Fichtner farm southwest of Sister Bay as originally planned. Woodruff said he was still looking for a better field of at least 100 acres.

The following Sunday, the parachute jump was attempted again, but this time with a new pilot, Christen Setvate, and Dan Morgan again attempting the jump. This time, the plane took off from the Borchert farm field, south of Forest Road, across from today's Zahn's Green Thumb and the Bert Stephenson home.

Tragedy almost struck this time, for as Morgan exited the plane for the jump, the plane dipped and broke into a tail spin. Morgan was able to pull himself back into the plane after it dropped from 1600 feet to 600 feet. After that, Woodruff announced he'd dropped the idea of a parachute jump, but continued the raffle in which the winner could get an airplane ride, or a \$5.00 bill.

Next time, the plane was to land and take off from the airstrip at Murphy Farm no.1, which bordered the shoreline. In 1940, Frank Cowles, a Murphy heir and descendant, was to build an airstrip there, shortly before he worked for the Army Air Corps in World War II, where he served as an instructor.

The winner of the free ride from the Borchert field was Bill Stephenson, who later become a pilot himself and a member of the Civil Air Patrol. But he, like Goserud, declined the ride in 1926 and chose to take the five-dollar bill. Many passengers paid to take the ride from the Borchert farm airstrip, including Door County's most famous photographer, Herbert Reynolds. He requested the extra thrill of a tailspin.

The postscript to the Woodruff saga was aired in the December 30, 1927, Door County Advocate. "Woodruff Bound Over Yesterday," read the headline. "Charged with having obtained property under false pretenses, James Woodruff, former proprietor of the new Lakeshore summer resort at Ephraim, was arraigned in justice court by District Attorney Grover M. Stapleton here yesterday."

Woodruff had left a diamond ring, valued at \$1200, with the operator of the Union Hotel in Sturgeon Bay as security for a debt he had incurred there. Then, he asked for the ring to be returned so he could sell it and pay the bill. He sold the ring, but didn't pay the bill, so he landed in court. Incidentally, no record could be found regarding a flight from the airstrip at the Murphy farm.

The September 11, 1925, Door County Advocate told about another aviation event in 1925, sponsored by the Door County Fair Association. This was not part of the Door County Fair, but a special

event put on by the Fair Association, presumably to show that the fairgrounds could be used for other events than the fair.

A performance group called the Federated Flyers was scheduled for September 17, in which a girl, Miss Babe Kalishek, would walk the wing of an airplane. A few weeks before she had been injured in a parachute jump, so her brother was scheduled to do the parachute jump at the demonstration.

One of the performers of the group was in a New London hospital, having dropped 4200 feet after losing control of his plane. He suffered a broken leg and body bruises. Babe was scheduled to fly the plane in a standing up position in his place.

The event came off beautifully, to the satisfaction of the audience. Because of his heavy leather pants, the parachutist was spared injury when he landed on a fence.

The old met the new in September of 1925, when Job Tong, a pioneer, one of the first presidents of the Door County Fair Association, got his first airplane ride.

"From oxcart to airplane is the experience of an 80-year old man," read the article in the Advocate.

"Last week Mr. Tong accepted the invitation of one of the pilots of the Federated Flyers, who performed at the fairgrounds from the Tong farm, and had a thrill of a lifetime. The weather was ideal and Mr. Tong thoroughly enjoyed seeing the county from the air.

"Friday, after taking any passengers up who had waited for the wind to subside, the flyers left for Milwaukee where they were scheduled for stunts Sunday. Since they had room, they offered to take two local people to Milwaukee for \$10. Mr. Fred "Fritz" Reynolds and Dan Gould took up the opportunity and in less than two hours they were at their destination."

In February of 1927, plans were being made to make use of the airplane for crop dusting. The representative of the Niagara Spray Company, which is still in business today in Door County, and Leslie Smith of the Decatur Air Dusting Company were laying plans to dust orchards.

Smith had successfully dusted Peninsula State Park in 1926. He had used deadly calcium arsenate to dust for worms in the park's trees, apparently without harm to any human beings who happened to be in the area. Harold Wilson of Ephraim was to conduct an investigation to see if the dead worms did any harm to the birds that ate them. It was truly a cut and try project, which the Department of Natural Resources and Environmental Protection Agency would frown upon today.

