

THEY WANTED WINGS
CHAPTER FIVE
1946-1947

END OF WORLD WAR II SAW FIRST FRIGID FUN FLIGHT

A very successful first Frigid Fun Flight was reported in the January 25, 1946, Door County Advocate.

One letter to accommodations chairman Karl S. Reynolds read in part, "Having been a member of the Civil Air Corps and having attended many of their banquets and breakfast flights, it's a pleasure to tell that you and your associates have exceeded all previous records."

About 150 state fliers had attended. The press coverage by outside newspapers and magazines was extensive. The Monday after the event the Milwaukee Sentinel published several photos, and on Tuesday a full page of pictures. The Milwaukee Journal, then a separate paper from the Sentinel, had an editorial about the possibility of combining winter pleasure flying with winter sports. In this way, the Frigid Fun Flight was a harbinger of the future.

It was thought that Life Magazine might carry a story about the event. This could be researched, since antique stores often carry old Life magazines, and it would be easy to look through the issues of January 1946, the first peacetime January in a long time, to see if they did carry a story.

The press carried photos of Karl Reynolds singing with a group of the fliers, and Frank Ullsperger receiving the club's Civil Air Corps charter. Also, an historic picture was taken of Frank and Cyril Lauscher, along with D. C. Pisha, cooking the boiled trout dinner, which, although it might not have been the first trout boil in Door County, would have predated others that claim to be the first.

A classic Advocate photo, worthy of locating if it still exists, is one showing Leo Stoneman, president of the local winter sports club, welcoming Steve Wittman, later to found the Experimental Aircraft Association, as he landed in Sawyer Harbor.

The airplanes that landed were representative of the late pre-war planes that began to emerge as times got better and more people could afford to fly; Taylor Crafts, Piper Cubs; and new post-war, 1946 model Aeroncas (including one purchased by airport manager George Meredith) Ercoupes, Fairchilds, Luscombes, Cessnas, and a Beechcraft Bonanza like the one Karl Reynolds was to purchase. A sign of the future for Steve Wittman was the experimental four-seater which he flew to the gathering.

VALUE OF AVIATION SHOWN IN ISLAND ACCIDENT

On March 3, 1946, an event that had tragic potentials occurred on Washington Island, once again proved the tremendous values of having an airport.

Dick Bjarnarson, the 13-year-old son of Mr. and Mrs. Oliver Bjarnarson, was hunting in a woods across from his home that Sunday afternoon, accompanied by David Foss and John Gunnlaugson. Dick put his gun against a stump, but it fell down and the shotgun discharged. Most of the shot pierced his right elbow, one grazed his ear, and another scratched his chest.

John, who was standing nearby, called to David and the two walked Dick back to his home a quarter mile away. Oliver Bjarnarson had intended to deliver a fish (he was a commercial fisherman) to another Islander, but had a premonition he should go home, where he found his severely injured son.

Dick fainted from the shock and had to be carried into the house. Oliver called Dr. Farmer, the resident doctor, and Dr. Farmer called George Meredith in Sturgeon Bay, asking him to deliver blood plasma immediately. The plan was to take Dick to an Escanaba hospital for treatment. Wally Arntzen was also called over from Escanaba.

The airport being not far from the Bjarnarson home, Dick was loaded into George Meredith's three place Aeronca, along with Dr. Farmer. Oliver Bjarnarson boarded Wally Arntzen's plane for the flight to the Escanaba hospital.

However, Meredith's carburetor began to ice up 2000 feet over Rock Island, and he had to turn back and land on the ice at Jackson Harbor, which lies between Rock Island and the northeast corner of Washington Island.

Meanwhile, according to the March 8, 1946, Door County Advocate, another plane flew over from Escanaba and brought Dick's mother, Esther, back to the Escanaba hospital.

Due to the icing problem with Meredith's plane, Wally Arntzen crowded Dick and Dr. Farmer into his plane, but, as he taxied on the ice to take off, his plane sank through thin ice into shallow water where fishermen had been cutting ice.

The only alternative was to call Dr. Dorchester up from Sturgeon Bay. Esther Bjarnarson was frantically waiting at the Escanaba hospital, not knowing what had become of her son and husband. She was called and she was flown back to the Island.

Dr. Dorchester flew his plane up to the Island, and he and Dick were transported to Dr. Farmer's office near the shores of Detroit

Harbor on the south side of the Island. (Dr. Farmer was not licensed to perform surgery.) Dr. Dorchester used the plasma Meredith had brought up, but additionally called on Dr. Farmer's sister-in-law to give a blood transfusion.

Dick had lost his right arm below the elbow, but he was fitted with a metal prosthesis when he recovered. The plucky youth could even don a boxing glove on the metal claw and do a creditable job of boxing. Fortunately, he was left-handed and so he wasn't handicapped in writing, either.

Once again, aviation had almost certainly saved the life of an Islander, and it still serves that function today. No wonder Washington Island was the first place in Door County to establish a municipality-owned airport.

AIRLINE PROPOSAL, EPHRAIM AIRPORT CAME IN 1946

In April 1946, according to an Advocate report, Cherryland Airport was struck by what could have been a fatal blow. A wind reported to have been of "hurricane force," possibly an undetected tornado, took the roof off the hangar and smashed it into the airport office. Only Karl Reynolds plane suffered damage to a wing, and no one was hurt.

In the middle of April 1946, Harold Dole moved his radio shop to Moeller's Garage, and Dr. Dan Dorchester received word that an air service based in Stevens Point planned to start a summertime charter air between Land O' Lakes and Milwaukee, via Sturgeon Bay.

DC-3s were to provide the transport, to make rail connections in Milwaukee and return the same day on a reverse of the route. Five or six passengers a day would be the required pick-up at Cherryland Airport to achieve a stop on the route. The price was attractive; \$6.00 one-way, but even with twice a day service and the great savings in time versus bus or car, there remained a doubt that enough traffic from Sturgeon Bay could be generated.

Also, in April 1946, the new Ephraim-Fish Creek airport was nearing completion. This was an interesting development, because the county highway department did much of the construction work, and the airport committee, headed by historian H. R. Holand in the absence of committee chairman, John Matter, planned to sell some of the property for homes.

A 160-acre tract had been purchased for \$4500, a wooded forty portion had been sold for \$1500, and an additional eight acres on the north end had been bought.

Two runways had been laid out, and the county was leveling the land, removing stone piles and wire fences in the process. The farmhouse on the property was being restored to use as an airport manager's home or to rent out. Lots for those who wanted to build homes on the edge of the airport had been laid out and some sold. (There's a community in Wisconsin where all the homes are owned by people who not only don't mind a little noise from airplanes, but want to be there, so they can hangar their airplane nearby.) A 7½ acre wooded plot was available for sale for someone that wanted seclusion, but a place to keep his airplane.

It was hoped that by selling land for homes, enough money would be generated to pay for the airport land as well as the improvements to the field.

Karl Reynolds, in Stevens Point, at one of the largest gathering of planes ever held in the state, invited the 350 fliers and their families to fly up to see the cherry blossoms. But 1946 was to be a year when no gathering of aviators for such a flight was held. For some reason, no one had a good guess when the cherries would bloom, so a date for a formal gathering couldn't be set. As it turned out, Michigan, the state that still controls the cherry price, had a poor crop, Door County had a fairly good crop that brought the best price in years, and as a result Felhofer Brothers sold a lot of new trucks, some of which are still in use today. Cherry growers were happy to say that the load of cherries they hauled in to the factory was worth more than the new truck they were hauling them with.

A sign of the coming times was seen in May of 1946 when an Idlewild turkey grower had 500 chicks shipped in by air to Cherryland Airport. It was claimed that the chicks suffered far fewer losses due to chilling in transport than if they had been shipped by train or truck.

That month the Advocate also reported that airline service might begin from Cherryland Airport on May, a couple of weeks earlier than Al Padags of North Central Airlines had said. Plans now were to start at Stevens Point, and fly to Land O' Lakes by way of Madison, Milwaukee and Sturgeon Bay. The plan now was to make one flight a day, eliminating the ability of Door County residents to fly to Milwaukee and return the same day. Landings were to be made at Maitland Field, named for the flier who had been the first, in 1927, to fly from San Francisco to Hawaii (along with his co-pilot.) As you recall, he had landed in Egg Harbor in 1928, and later became the head of the state aviation agency.

The Advocate editor expressed some doubt that the one trip a day plan would be of much use, and also suggested that it would be ideal if

two trips a day would be made to and from Madison. The airline's plans presented would allow only a small amount of business to be conducted in either city, about two hours, even if two flights were scheduled.

IDEA FOR SEAPLANE BASE, TRAGEDY, CAME IN JUNE, 1946

Another plan put forward in early May 1946, was one to set up a base for seaplanes in Door County.

This plan, according to the May 10, 1946 Advocate, came up at a meeting of the Sturgeon Bay Yacht Club. Dr. Dorchester and Karl Reynolds had already ordered a new Republic Seabee amphibian, a plane that could land on both water and land. They envisioned choosing an appropriate seaplane landing dock. Commodore Dick Stearn appointed Dorchester and Reynolds, as well as Dick Bosman, to survey the bay for possible landing sites.

Since Dorchester and Reynolds were members of the Civil Air Patrol, they fostered the seaplane idea which would assist in both air and land searches. Their plane was purchased from Cherryland Aircraft Sales, which had ordered five of the Republic Seabees. The article said that a total of 11 of these planes was to be delivered to this area.

Cabot's Lodge at Riley's Point had requested the committee for information about building a seaplane ramp, and Leathem Smith had also requested similar information for his Snug Harbor subdivision that he planned to build near his Leathem Smith Lodge.

Evidently the North Central Airlines plan to start services on May 15, 1946, did not materialize, because the May 24 issue of the Advocate told of the landing of the first DC-3 of the company. "Daily Service to Start June 1, Plan," read the headline.

That was a trial run, and the Advocate of May 31, 1946, gave its regular schedule, which was to start on Memorial Day. That date, then always May 30, fell on a Saturday.

The schedule now called for an 8 a.m. departure from Stevens Point, with stops at Madison and Milwaukee, and arrival in Sturgeon Bay at 1:25 p.m. The flight then would go to Land O' Lakes and get back to Sturgeon Bay at 4:10 p.m. From there it would go to Milwaukee, Madison and Stevens Point. The fare from Sturgeon Bay to Milwaukee or Land O' Lakes was to be \$6.73, and \$10.35 to Madison. This would allow an overnight stay in either Milwaukee or Madison, which would work out well for an evening meeting. A person could fly from Sturgeon Bay to either city, stay overnight, do a day's business, stay overnight and fly back the next morning. In 1946, when

there was no I-43 and Highway 41 wasn't a four lane, flying by North Central Airlines was a better deal than driving.

On June 7, 1946, the Advocate reported the arrival of the first North Central airline passenger, Mrs. Julius Rudolf, from Milwaukee. (Apparently, this was a trial run.) She had come to visit her son-in-law and daughter, Mr. and Mrs. Clem Kerscher of Maplewood. Her husband had offered to pay her air fare to Sturgeon Bay if a flight could be found. To her surprise, after calling Mitchell field, she found that there indeed was such a flight. No one was there at Cherryland to meet her, but a couple going to Algoma gave her a ride.

In the June 6, 1946, Advocate column, "With Our Boys and Girls in The Service," we were told that Col. Thomas Gillespie, who was born in Sturgeon Bay, had received his third Legion of Merit for establishing telephone and radio communications with China during World War II. His duty in China had started when he flew over the Hump, as the path over Burma to China was called.

Col. Gillespie was married to Lillian Matzke from Southern Door. Her sister, Laura, had married Arthur Bertschinger from Egg Harbor. Gillespie had entered the army in 1917, and when WWII came along, he was sent to North Africa to be an aide to Eisenhower. But after his jeep hit a land mine, the army decided he was too brilliant and talented to risk on the battlefield, so they sent him back to the states to head all the U. S. Signal Corps training, under Gen. Ingalls. So he had much to do with providing expert radio operators for the ground forces and Army Air Corps.

In June 1946, Karl Reynolds almost lost his plane in a windstorm at the Wausau airport while attending a Civil Air Patrol fly-in. His plane was blown into the side of Dr. Dorchester's plane when a sudden squall came up. Dr. Dan's plane suffered a hole in the fuselage, and another plane was completely demolished.

Also in June of 1946, Door County lost the great shipbuilder, L. D. Smith, in a boating accident in the bay of Green Bay. His daughter Patsy was able to swim to shore and report the capsizing of the boat that had once been owned by President Franklin Delano Roosevelt. According to the late C. Raymond Christianson, superintendent of the Smith shipyard during World War II, the cabin, which was intended to be entered only by a door in the top that could be closed to keep out water, had been modified to accommodate the president's wheel chair. A hole had been cut in the side of the cabin, and, according to Christianson, he had said to Smith, "I suppose the first thing you'll want me to do is close up that opening in the side of the cabin." He said, "Smith replied, 'No, leave it as it is. It makes it easier to get into

the cabin and I like it that way.' I think that's why it filled up so fast with water when the squall hit."

Be that as it may, planes were called out to search for the three bodies of those aboard, which was to be done whenever there was a dead calm, at which time life preservers were to be dropped when a body was found. Smith's body and that of another victim were quickly found, but the body of Mary Loomis was not found until days later.

NEW PROPOSALS FOR AIRLINE, AIRPORT CAME IN 1946

While the search for Mary Loomis's body was going on, in the first week of July 1946, a meeting was held at the city hall to discuss the possibility of getting a federal appropriation to improve Cherryland Airport. M. W. Torkelson, head of the state planning board, and T. J. Jordan, executive secretary of the state aeronautics commission, came from Madison to explain how the funds might be obtained. Members of the county airport committee, the Civil Air Patrol, the Air Power League and an official of North Central Airlines were expected to attend.

Jordan also was expected to explain the provisions of a G. I. Bill pilot training program for which at least 25 local veterans had already applied. The airport already had a qualified instructor, George Meredith, and he owned qualified student planes. Classroom space could be arranged in the airport office building, the Advocate article of July 5, 1946, said.

A week later, after the meeting was held, the Advocate reported that chairman Harry Schuyler, head of the county board, was planning a special meeting of the board to discuss the forming of a master plan for the airport.

In order to keep up with the Air Age, the article said, the airport needed a repair shop and heating equipment and a few other improvements in order to qualify for a G. I. Flying school. By this time, 35 veterans had signed up for a flying course, with a top enrollment of 50 expected.

Karl S. Reynolds, by now the vice-chairman of the state aeronautical commission and president of the newly-formed Wisconsin Flying Farmers Association, spoke at the meeting and said he wanted to build his own hangar at the airport. Russell Austad, chairman of the county board's airport committee, said the lack of a plan was delaying the drilling of a water well on the property. Austad was a major promoter and facilitator of the airport improvement, and Tom Pinney, Sid Telfer Sr., Dr. T. C. West, Frank Ullsperger, Henry Overbeck, Art

