

THEY WANTED WINGS
CHAPTER SIX
1948-1967

DRAMATIC RESCUE, AIRPORT IMPROVEMENT,
REYNOLDS LOSS IN 1948

The first Advocate of 1948, published on January 2, carried the news of another lifesaving event in the history of Door County aviation.

On the morning of December 29, commercial fisherman Roy Claflin and his sons, Aaron and Keith, had walked out on the ice off Sugar Creek west of White Star Road in Gardner township to set their nets. Finished with the job by 10 a. m., they started walking back to shore, to find they were adrift on an ice floe.

Walking all around the ice floe, they soon found out they were completely cut off from the shore. Today, they probably would have carried a cellular telephone, as did someone who in recent years was adrift on the ice, and would have been able to call back home for help. But it would be 30 years before even members of the Door County Amateur Radio Club could make telephone calls from a hand-held unit, and 45 years before the establishment of cellular telephone service.

It was nearly dark when the Claflins did the only thing they could do to attract attention from the shore, build a fire.

Someone called the coast guard at the canal station. They got as close as they could, but the waters were not navigable. They had radio communications equipment, so they could keep in touch with the shore, and the Door County Traffic Police officers M. W. Millard, Eldon W. Carmody and sheriff Hallie Rowe were able to communicate back to the sheriff's department with the police radio that had been installed in their vehicles just three years before.

Dr. Dan Dorchester was contacted to see if planes could be used in aiding the rescue of the Claflins, and he immediately organized a large group of volunteers. Headquarters were set up at Cherryland Airport, where manager George Meredith made the facilities available for the group, which included Karl Reynolds, Lougee Stedman, Chuck Ferguson and the city and county police and traffic officers.

Bill Wolter of the Sturgeon Bay Shipbuilding and Drydock company recruited a crew for a tug he was readying, to try to rescue the Claflins, with Capt. Norman Fairchild as the commander. The crew consisted of Emil Luedtke, Jules Corbisier, Bill Wanke and Clifford

Haen. John Purves was to provide life rafts and a larger ship from the Roen Steamship company if the smaller tug could not reach the men.

The coast guard reached the shipyard where the tug was being readied. By midnight, Dr. Dorchester and Karl Reynolds were flying their first trip over the area where the Claflins were trapped. When they had found the spot, they flew back and dropped bundles of emergency supplies into the rear cockpit of a small AT-6 trainer, and Reynolds dropped them out as Dorchester flew the plane.

They knew they had hit their target when the Claflins pulled out the flashlights that had been dropped inside blanket rolls and flashed them up at the plane.

Chuck Krause, the Advocate writer covering the rescue attempt, wrote, "Flying was particularly dangerous, for there was no moon and the only lights available for the snow-covered runway were those thrown from the police vehicles that lined the north and south ends of the field."

Even telephone operators cooperated in the rescue. They broke into circuits and kept lines open to aid in communications. Then, Door County did not have dial telephones, and local operators could do that.

By means of the patchwork of coast guard and police vehicle radios, the rescuers were able to keep in contact with each other, and also convey the news back to the Advocate office. Today, of course, communications would be much more sophisticated, with the Door County Emergency Government radio equipment, cellular and radio equipment of the Door County Sheriff's Department, coast guard radio and global positioning satellite equipment, and a vast number of mobile and hand held radio equipment operated by members of the Door County Amateur Radio Club.

But the rescuers of the Claflins did pretty well with the equipment they had, and organized the rescue attempt efficiently. The third airplane pass supplied the Claflins with life rafts, notes and additional blankets and comforters. Aaron Claflin said after he was rescued, "I was almost hit by one of the life rafts."

At 3:30 a. m., the rescue efforts were suspended and begun again at daybreak, and the Claflins were rescued.

The Claflin boys stopped in at the Advocate office and expressed their undying gratitude for those that were concerned and assisted them in their twelve hour ordeal stranded on the ice.

Something good came out of this harrowing experience. It was the beginning of an effort to coordinate the efforts of all rescue groups in Door County. Unfortunately, that coordination still hadn't been

achieved less than a year after the Claflins were rescued, when one of Door County's greatest tragedies occurred.

In the January 9, 1948, Karl S. Reynolds announced that Col. Lester J. Maitland, who had been recently appointed director of the Wisconsin State Aeronautics commission, would be attending the third annual Frigid Fun Flight.

The first time Maitland had visited Door County was in 1928, when he landed in Egg Harbor, probably at Horseshoe Bay Farms, which already had an airstrip. The year before, Maitland and another pilot had made the first flight from Oakland, California to Hawaii.

Art Mac Millin, the reservations chairman of this year's flight, had ambitiously limited the reservations to 400 guests. Planes were expected to arrive as early as Friday night, February 13. Most fliers would come on Saturday and be able to join the delegate's luncheon at the Nautical Inn.

On Saturday afternoon, winter sports activities were planned at Potawatomi State Park, and the Lumberjack banquet and dance would be held at the Nightingale in the evening. Sunday morning breakfasts were scheduled for the Swoboda and Carmen hotels. As usual, D. C. Pisha was in charge of the trout boil to be held at the airport hangar.

More than 400 people attended that event. 119 small planes landed, the number reduced by hazardous flying conditions elsewhere, but not in Door County. Saturday was a beautiful winter day here; some fliers who couldn't make it here on Saturday came in Sunday. By 10:30 a.m., the airport was full of planes. Planes came in from all over the state and some even came in from other states, including Minnesota and Texas, as well as nearby Michigan. Visitors even got in some ice fishing.

Karl Reynolds and his wife were in Rome, Italy, and they sent their greetings. Lt. Chuck Ferguson sent his message from Goose Bay, Labrador, where he was stationed.

Among the well-known people who attended were Col. Maitland and his wife, Mr. and Mrs. T. K. Jordan (he was the executive secretary of the state aeronautics commission), and Mr. and Mrs. Steve Wittman. Wittman was a founder of the Experimental Aeronautics Association, the EEA.

While in Door County, according to the February 20, 1948, Advocate, members of the Wisconsin Civil Air Corps held a meeting at the Nautical Inn, during which Col. Maitland spoke about development of facilities for furthering private flying in the state. Among those attending were Dr. Dan Dorchester, Dr. T. C. West, and Chuck Krause of the Advocate staff.

The March 5, 1948, Advocate reported that the county had purchased land for additions to Cherryland Airport. Russell Austad, chairman of the county board airport committee, announced that the 180-acre Andrew Buechner farm was scheduled to be purchased, along with his home and farm buildings, while allowing him to occupy the place for a limited time until the deal was finalized and development of the field was commenced.

Austad also said a deal to purchase the John Soukup property to the east of the present airport had been made.

The Green Engineering Company of Madison was interested in bidding on the airport improvements. That project would enable Cherryland Airport to accommodate the planes of Wisconsin Central Airlines, which had promised to schedule flights when the east-west runway was completed. That was contingent on the completion of the new Austin Straubel field in Green Bay, which was expected in May or June 1948.

Washington Island, which the Advocate writer on April 9, 1948, said was "One of the most air-minded communities in the state," voted for a \$6,375 project at their town airport. The measure passed at the spring election 116 to 29. To the Island, the airplane was the key to the rest of the world.

On April 30, 1948, an Advocate article announced that the John Soukup property had been purchased at \$2800 for the forty acre tract. Russell Austad, chairman of the county airport committee, said that the papers were being readied for the county board meeting on May 10. The property would fulfill the requirement from Wisconsin Central Airlines to provide an east-west runway so its planes could land no matter what direction the wind as blowing from.

Airline officials had told Austad that plans to stop at Sturgeon Bay were going forward, but it would be late summer before service could be started. Again, Austad was told service to Sturgeon Bay couldn't be started until the new airport at Green Bay was completed,

In May of 1948, Glen Sohns of Ephraim, who had graduated from the Wold-Chamberlain Aeronautics school at Minneapolis, had purchased a Piper cruiser with floats. He was planning to furnish sight-seeing or charter flights from the Eagle Inn or the Williams Sohns store. He could carry two passengers besides himself.

That announcement was in the May 5, 1948 Advocate, along with a notice that the Advocate, for the first time, would be published twice a week, on Tuesday and Thursday afternoons.

In July of 1948, the Flight "D" headquarters of 227th Composite Squadron of the U. S. Army Air Corps Reserve was formed in

Sturgeon Bay. Air corps reservists in the area were eligible to join. They included Lt. Harold Krauss, flight commander, Lt. Richard Bosman, Lt. Art Mac Millin and Lt. Dan O'Hern of Sturgeon Bay and Lt. Anthony Schlise of Forestville, as well as Lt. Don Fagerstrom of Sister Bay, and 22 other officers in this area. (The name of the group was soon changed to the Air Force Reserve, in line with the official military change from Army Air Corps, which was used until the end of WWII, to the U. S. Air Force, a department now separate from the U. S. Army.)

On July 29, 1948, T. K. Jordan, executive secretary of the Wisconsin State Aeronautical commission, stopped at Cherryland airport on his way to Washington Island. He reported that the plans for the airport improvements had cleared the Chicago office of the Civil Aeronautics Administration, and that he thought Washington would soon give the go-ahead for construction.

A few days later, the announcement came that bids could be submitted for the work. Russell Austad, chairman of the county airport committee, said that the project should cost about \$43,000, exclusive of the price of the land.

During this summer of 1948, last minute preparations were being made for the "Peninsula Cavalcade," Door County's celebration of Wisconsin's 100th birthday. The stage extravaganza was held at the Door County Fair, with Laverne Reince of Maplewood starring as Miss Door County. 1948 was also the year that Sadie Cody was burned alive in her furnace by someone who wanted her to give him money.

The September 14 Advocate brought the news that a Milwaukee firm, the A. B. Lynch company, was the low bidder, at \$36,706, for the airport work. Chairman Russell Austad and his committee, consisting of Tom Pinney sr., and Charles O. Hanson, were to study the proposal and make recommendations to the county board. The work was to be completed in 90 days.

Included in the work was clearing and grubbing of the land and removing stumps, stone fences and debris, excavating and grading, installing fencing and boundary markers and seeding.

Russell Austad gave a news release on September 30 that Washington had approved the Lynch bid for the new east-west runway, and all that was needed was the signature of the county officials. The Lynch company had left their equipment in Green Bay, where they had done another job, in anticipation of getting the Cherryland Airport job.

A week later, the Lynch company arrived in Sturgeon Bay with its equipment. Work was begun immediately, with a crew of 20 men.

The fencerows and stone piles were removed and bulldozers were set to uprooting the trees. Thirty ton earthmovers transported a gravel knoll a half mile west to help level the terrain so the 3200 foot runway could be built. That would enable planes to land east and west, as well as north and south.

The November 16, 1948, Advocate carried a front page photo of four American Legion members from Door County who had just received their membership cards, Don Reynolds, Karl S. Reynolds, Henry Overbeck and Frank Ullsperger, along with that of Frank Marek, local post service officer.

The occasion being commemorated was the flying to Milwaukee of 226 Door County enrollments in the Legion. Naturally, with about 2500 local men and women from the county serving in the armed forces in World War II, there were a huge number eligible to join the Legion. The Archie Lackshire post alone hoped to enroll as many as 500. (Actually, most veterans never join a veteran's organization, just being glad to get out of a war alive and get on with their lives.)

Karl Reynolds flew the group to Milwaukee with his new Beechcraft Bonanza, and they were greeted at Mitchell Field by the state officers. They then attended a buffet lunch at the Blatz auditorium.

Another article in that issue discussed the never-ending battle to get Wisconsin Central to begin airline service to Sturgeon Bay. Several Upper Michigan cities had joined with Sturgeon Bay to institute federal action. Promises had been followed by more promises, but there seemed to be no action by the airlines.

The cities concerned held a meeting in Iron Mountain, to which Wisconsin Central president Francis Higgins was invited, but he sent a letter instead.

Higgins said in the letter that before service could begin, all federal improvements to airports must be completed; that he was having trouble securing suitable aircraft for the venture; that he was having trouble with financing. (Remember the bond drive? Art Cermak said recently he bought stock in the company.)

Interest in improving air transportation to and from Door County was growing by leaps and bounds, when, on December 4, 1948, one of Door County's greatest tragedies occurred. In the book, "The Story of Wisconsin's Great Canning Industry," we find this bulletin from the Wisconsin Canner's Association:

"Three of the leading figures in the Wisconsin cherry industry were killed Saturday evening, December 4, when their plane crashed nine miles north of Sturgeon Bay in fog and bad weather. They were

Karl S. Reynolds, vice-president and treasurer of Reynolds Brothers, Inc.; Lougee Stedman, general manager and secretary-treasurer of Fruit Growers Cooperative; and E. L. Kossow, secretary of Reynolds Brothers, Inc.

"The three men were returning from a conference on labor supply matters at Beaver Dam and took off from the Fond du Lac airport about 4:45 p.m. in the private plane piloted by Karl Reynolds. The crash occurred about 6:00 p.m. Saturday evening but the bodies were not found until Sunday morning.

"Karl S. Reynolds, who was 49, had long been active in industry and civic affairs. The son of a pioneer canner, William S. Reynolds, Karl was a member of the Old Guard Society and had served in various offices and on various committees of the state and national canners associations, the National Red Cherry Institute and the Wisconsin Horticultural Society. He had also served as executive vice-president of the Wisconsin State Chamber of Commerce and had been a director of the organization since 1929. He was active in aviation circles having been appointed by the Governor to the State Aeronautics Commission and having headed the Wisconsin Flying Farmers and the Wisconsin Civil Air Patrol.

"He is survived by his wife and four children, and by three brothers, including Don, who is president of Reynolds Brothers, inc.

"Lougee Stedman, who was 41, had been general manager of Fruit Growers Cooperative since 1946 and had been a practicing attorney in Sturgeon Bay prior to that time. He is survived by his wife and three children.

"Ervin L. Kossow, who was 47, had been with the Reynolds firm for 29 years and was office manager in addition to being secretary. He is survived by his wife and one child."

The loss of these men was a great blow to the cherry industry, and Reynolds loss was also a great blow to the advancement of Door County aviation. The load had to be taken up by others.

Speculation as to the cause of the crash continues to this day, but probably the best explanation was given by the late Frank Ullsperger, a World War II air corps veteran flyer, cherry industry keystone and friend of all three men who were lost.

In a 1970s interview, Frank Ullsperger said, "Karl probably adjusted the altimeter at Fond du Lac, but because of the lower air pressure in the bad weather up here, the altimeter didn't read right, and, with the fog, he didn't realize he was flying in the tree tops."

Sumner Harris, editor of the Advocate, whose son, Chandler, was a pilot, wrote this editorial: "The triple tragedy of last Saturday night

