



Pioneer Ships, Men And Women Of The Air

Long Island is steeped in aviation history. My earliest recollection of Roosevelt Field is of a distant grammar school class trip there in the 1930's. I remember the old hangar that housed several bi planes and a mural depicting aircraft from long ago.

Roosevelt Field was named in honor of Lieutenant Quentin Roosevelt, son of former president Theodore Roosevelt of Oyster Bay, Long Island. Quentin was shot down and killed in aerial combat over enemy occupied France. He was buried by the Germans with full military honors. There was still some chivalry in those days. The early aerial fighters called themselves "Knights of the Air."

Early aircraft were of wood and fabric construction, and many wires, struts, cross braces, turnbuckles and other devices were used to provide the necessary structural strength. The wood of preference was Sitka Spruce. Fabric covering the wings and fuselage was of linen, coated with a liquid compound, banana -oil dope. Dope shrunk the fabric to drum tightness and added strength and water resistance.

The Hempstead Plains, in central Nassau County, were a natural airfield- a flat, treeless sixty thousand acre prairie, the only true prairie east of the Allegheny Mountains. In the seventeenth century, the plains were flat meadows covered with pasture grass, brush and wild flowers and almost completely bare of trees. They were primarily used for grazing sheep and cattle. In 1869, A T Stewart, a merchant from New York City, bought over 7000 acres of what were common lands, some of which were developed into Garden

City. With only a farm house here and there and no overhead wires, the Plains were ideal for aviation, a crash landing could be made almost anywhere. The Hempstead Plains would later be divided into several fields, and bear many names-Hempstead Plains Field, then Hazlehurst Aerodrome followed by Curtiss Field adjoining Roosevelt Field and then Roosevelt Field and of course Mitchell Field. The eastern field was sold in 1936 and became a racetrack, while the western field located at the corner of Clinton and Old Country Road continued to operate as an aviation center. At its peak in the 1930s, it was America's busiest civilian airfield. The Hempstead Plains were to be the scene of intense aviation activity for over fifty years.

Glenn Curtiss was born in Hammondsport, NY in 1878. After completing eighth grade he went to work for Eastman Kodak in Rochester for four dollars a week. The boy genius devised a way to increase his productivity, and by switching from a weekly salary to

over a decade later it held a place of honor in the lobby of his Garden City complex.

As a motorcycle manufacturer and racer, Curtiss was very successful. Indian Motorcycle, his completion in the market place, trailed his smoke on the race course.

Thomas Scott Baldwin used Glenn's engines in his dirigibles and moved his company to Hammondsport to be near his "engine man". Together they built the U. S. Army's first dirigible. Shortly thereafter, Glenn realized that his future was in aviation.

In 1907 he made his first flight. He went on to build the biplane June Bug and on July Fourth 1908 won the "Scientific American Trophy" by flying over five thousand feet at Hammondsport, winning the prize and exceeding the requirement by a large margin. This trophy was to become the property of the man who won it three years in succession. The conditions were to be changed each year, in accordance with the progress of the science of aviation. Curtiss received U.S. Pilot's license #1 from the Aero Club of America



piece work, he tripled his earnings overnight.

Like his arch rivals, the Wright Brothers, he opened a bicycle shop. He went on to manufacture motorcycles and dependable light weight motor cycle engines known as Hercules Motors. In 1906, racing an overpowered motorcycle of his own construction at a sustained speed of 136.4 miles per hour, he established a land speed record which stood until 1911 for cars and 1930 for motorcycles. For his skill, daring and passion for speed, sports writers dubbed him HELL RIDER on the race course. He was known at the time as The Fastest Man on Earth. This monster machine was never ridden again but

On July 17, 1909, Curtiss flew his famous biplane, the Golden Flyer, from the Hempstead Plains. The flight was from a tract of land between Old Country Road and Washington Avenue, near the Mineola Fair Grounds. A triangular course of one and a third miles was laid out. Glenn made arrangements with the Aero Club of America to observe the flight as he wanted to win the Scientific American Trophy for the first flight of twenty-five kilometers (fifteen and a half miles. This would be the second time that Glen would win the Scientific American Trophy. Curtiss, the first to fly a plane on Long Island, circled the course nineteen times and covered a dis-

tance of almost twenty five miles in fifty eight minutes at an average speed of about thirty five miles per hour. Aviation had come to the Hempstead Plains.

In the spring of 1910, Curtiss accepted a challenge from Joseph Pulitzer to make the first overland flight, a course between Albany and New York City. Curtiss carried a note from the Mayor of Albany to the Mayor of New York, allowing him to lay claim to delivering the first airmail in the country. He made one planned landing in Poughkeepsie, and an emergency landing on a large lawn in Manhattan at Two Hundred Fourteenth Street and Broadway. Curtiss and his Hudson Flyer circled the Statue of Liberty and landed on Governors Island. He had broken the twenty four mile record, covered one hundred fifty miles in two and a half hours flying time at an average speed of fifty four miles per hour, and established himself as a national figure. He also earned permanent possession of the Scientific American Trophy.

In the fall of 1910 an International Aerial Meet was held at Belmont Park in Elmont. The greatest aviators from America, France and England came to compete at the spacious race track. There were daily altitude contests, cross-country races, mechanic's prizes and other events with a total of \$74,800 in prizes. The altitude contest for a \$5,000 prize was between Arch Hoxsey and Ralph Johnstone. Their planes would climb upward until out of sight. Late in the afternoon of the last day of the meet, they both took off in the final contest. Spiraling upward they continued climbing as the sun went down. Neither would stop until his gas tanks were

dry. Unable to see them, the spectators heard the engines sputter, then stop. Soon they saw the planes reappear and glide to a safe landing. Johnstone had won and established a new world's altitude record of 9,714 feet.

Some interesting personal anecdotes of the flyers are as follows:

- **Ralph Johnstone**, a member of the Wright exhibition team, set a world record for altitude, climbing to 9,712 feet in his Model B at Belmont Park. He consistently competed against Arch Hoxsey to set new records. Johnstone died in November 1910 in Denver while putting on a demonstration flight.
- **Arch Hoxsey** was one of the aviators to appear at both the 1910 Los Angeles and Belmont air meets. He was killed on December 31, 1910, in Los Angeles, while trying to better his own world altitude record.
- **Charles Hamilton**, a famous Curtiss exhibition pilot, flew at the 1910 Belmont air meet. He always flew carrying a loaded gun and was frequently drunk.
- In October 1910, **Claude Grahame-White** won the Gordon Bennett speed race at the Belmont air meet. The next month, he flew to Washington, D.C. and landed on a street next to the White House.

Postmaster General Frank Hitchcock wished to be credited with making the first official air mail delivery in the United States. At the International Air Meet held in Garden City, Long Island in 1911, he approached two flyers to take him on a prearranged air mail run. Neither pilot was willing to coop-

erate due to of a lack of financial incentive. Enter Earle Lewis Ovington, a participant in the Air Meet. Born December 1879, he was an aeronautical engineer, aviator, inventor and former lab assistant to Thomas Edison. Earle volunteered to make the mail drop from Garden City Field to Mineola Field. There was one major problem, Earle's plane had but one cockpit which would preclude Hitchcock from getting the credit. At first Hitchcock declined Earle's offer to make the flight gratis but reluctantly accepted. After being sworn in as the country's first U.S. airmail pilot and given the air mail pouch, he took off. Five and a half miles later, he arrived over Mineola. He circled the field at 500 feet, took aim, tossed the bag over the side and hit the mark dead center. He delivered 640 letters and 1,280 postcards, including a letter to himself from the United States Postal Service designating him as Official Air Mail Pilot #1.

The publisher William Randolph Hurst offered a \$50,000 prize to the first aviator to fly coast to coast in either direction, in less than thirty days. Cal Rogers took up the challenge. He took off from Sheepshead Bay, Long Island, on September 17, 1911 and landed at Pasadena, CA on November 5th, 1911. Nineteen days too late to collect the prize he finished with one leg in a cast. But he finished. The flight consumed eighty two hours and four minutes of flying time and included sixty five forced landings, most of them painful. He carried the first transcontinental U.S. Air Mail pouch and was accompanied on the ground by a support crew that repaired and rebuilt the plane after each landing.

— *Bob Doxsee*