



Buffalo Tales



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Buffalo County Historical Society

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BARNSTORMERS, A FLYING PARSON AND OTHER AVIATORS

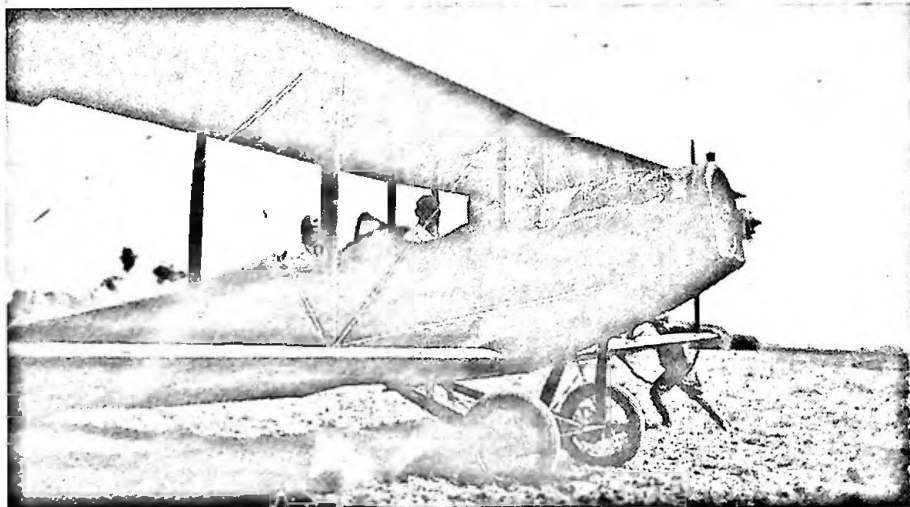
Aviation: 1911-1942

by Alice Shaneyfelt Howell

This is the second in a series of articles on the history of aviation in the Buffalo County area. This article, published last month in February, 1988, *Buffalo Tales*, was written by Mardi Anderson.

After its first air show in 1911, aviation in Kearney and throughout the nation became a subject of increasing interest, particularly after World War I. The war had speeded up aviation technology and the men who had been in the Army Air Corps returned to civilian life with a renewed interest in flying. The late George Munro, long time Kearney attorney, was an early aviator, having served in the Air Corps in World War I, along with another Buffalo County native, the late Guy Henninger of Shelton. Mr. Munro, however, did not continue as a flier as did many who had served in the war.

The period after the war brought out a new and exciting kind of showmen—the barnstormers, many of them army fliers who did not want to give up flying. The skills of some of these recently discharged aviators were such that when Kaufmann-Wernert



Classic Curtiss "Jenny" from World War I era.

brought a stunt flier to Kearney for a 1919 air show it was stated that "the professional who is to make the flight here next Tuesday is not one of (the) unreliable sort."

The barnstorming airplanes brought out the whole town to see stunt flying, an

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BUFFALO TALES is the official publication of the Buffalo County Historical Society, a non-profit organization, whose address is P. O. Box 523, Kearney, NE 68848. It is sent to all members of the Society.

Membership is open to anyone who has an interest in the history of Buffalo County and its people. Annual dues, payable January 1, are:

Basic Membership	\$10.00
Institutional Membership	\$15.00
Supporting Membership	\$25.00

Life memberships are \$100.00 for an individual; \$150.00 for husband and wife, jointly.

Officers and Directors: President, Margaret Hohnholt; Vice-President, Alice Howell; Secretary, Colleen Parker; Treasurer, Philip S. Holmgren. Directors: Glen E. Wisch, Frances Link, Barb Avery, Merlin Burgland, Minnette Steinbrink, Edna Hehner, Robert Stubblefield, Viola Livingston and Chandler Lynch III. Publications Chairman: Alice Howell.

YOUR HISTORICAL SOCIETY NEEDS YOU

As noted in last month's *Buffalo Tales*, our financial situation is such that the position of Museum Director was discontinued as of December 15, 1987. Mardi Anderson had served in that capacity since 1983.

This is a serious setback in the work of your Historical Society. During twelve years of museum operation our accomplishments have grown each year; more visitors tour the museum, more school children of Buffalo County take part in the fine educational program in the District No. 1 schoolhouse; we have more requests for documented research, for speakers at schools and clubs, and for information to be provided for the news media. Our desire is to continue all of these services, and for this a paid director is essential.

In order to hire and keep a salaried director, there must be a solid financial base year after year, and so we are appealing first to you, the members, for whatever financial support you can give—not just in 1988, but in each succeeding year. To explain our dues structure as set out at the top of this page:

Basic \$10.00 membership provides no support for the museum, but covers only the *Buffalo Tales* printing and postage and meeting expenses.

\$10.00 of each Supporting Membership is also used for publication and meeting expense, but the remaining \$15.00 could be used toward a director's salary.

Life Memberships provide only interest, the principal remaining as an endowment, making this income dependent on current interest rates.

Annual year-after-year donations specified for a director's salary of approximately \$15,000 will provide the answer to this problem.

Each one of you 566 members of the Historical Society is important, and it takes all of us working together to reach our goals. Your Finance Committee is not asking for your dollars at this time. What we need is an expression or a pledge of your support. Please address your response to the Historical Society Finance Committee, Box 523, Kearney 68848, or contact a committee member: Merlin Burgland, chairman; Carl Oran, Alice Howell, Colleen Parker or Margaret Clark of Kearney; Viola Livingston of Gibbon; Bob Stubblefield of Shelton; or Barb O'Neill of Pleasanton.

Do it now! We need a Museum Director.

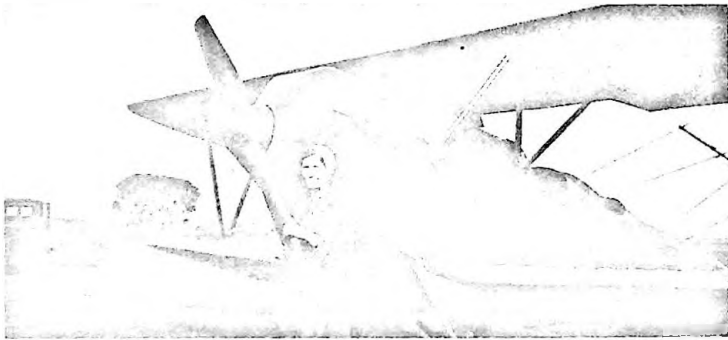
aerial circus, or be given fancy flights or just ordinary passenger rides. The Grand Island Aero Company in the summer of 1919 secured a field three miles south of Kearney on the east side of the road and advertised the Curtis plane, which could "make 110 miles per hour." Their ad stated: "No stunt flying even by request." Prices were \$15 for a ten-minute ride and \$25 for a twenty-minute ride.

The Chautauqua talent booked in 1919 included the "Flying Parson," who was described in the *Kearney Daily Hub* of July 5:

This man comes to Kearney from Red Oak, Ia., in his plane, covering the entire circuit in this, his most popular method of flying. The "Flying Parson" has seen a veteran's service in France. He was an instructor there since the United States entered the war and is noted as a performer of most hazardous aerial stunts. He originated the tail spin, used only by aviators in an emergency, when all other attempts to baffle an enemy force fails.

The "Flying Parson" will show his machine at the grounds, demonstrate in A.B.C. fashion the workings of a plane and then also make an exhibition flight and thus practically demonstrate some "stunts" in which the "Flying Parson" excels.

In September, 1929, the Kearney Chamber of Commerce sponsored a caravan of aircraft which was touring from city to city across the state. Well publicized in



Mary Hawkinson, now Mrs. Chester Coover, beside a "Morton McCook" plane constructed by the Morton brothers in the early 1930's.

advance, the caravan of 17 planes, both biplanes and monoplanes, arrived in Kearney around noon on September 12. A crowd of 10,000 people lined the field to watch the landings. Stores downtown closed for two hours so that all could attend, but reopened at 2:30 and stayed open that night to accommodate the crowd of people who had come to Kearney for the occasion.

These barnstormers' shows were popular attractions in the Kearney area throughout the 20's and 30's. A young aviatrix from Ord named Evelyn Sharp was flying in 1932 around Kearney, using a field northwest of the city where is now located the Grenoble Apartments at 18th Avenue and 39th Street. Evelyn at age 16 was the state's youngest licensed woman pilot. She bought a plane and barnstormed to pay off the loan. She served as a World War II flight instructor and member of the Women's Auxiliary Ferrying Squadron. She was killed in a crash in Pennsylvania in 1944.

Have you read Page 2? Please respond.

It was in the 1920's that Kearney men started flying in greater numbers—Larry and Faye Hult, Harold Brown, Ken Holmes, Walt Miles, Arthur and Ralph Barney. Other Kearney fliers of that time also built planes. Vern and Glen Morton built a few biplanes with water-cooled engines known as the *Morton-McCooks*. These planes were in use in the area for years afterwards. Another aviator of the 20's was Chet Coover, who is said to have put together in his living room one winter the wings of a *Swallow*, another Morton plane, while the fusilage and engine were built in a garage elsewhere, thus making the plane easy to assemble and ready for flying as soon as the weather was right. Vern Morton, along with Arthur Barney, died in a 1935 plane crash near Elm Creek in 1935. Glen Morton and Chet Coover continued their interest in aviation until retirement. Both are still living.

The 1930's and 1940's brought more active fliers and plane builders into Kearney's aviation history: Tim Grantham, Wm. J. Knoll, Ed Swan, George Faser, Paul Beshore, Murl Patterson and Walt and Jerry May. Walt May spent his life in and around Kearney as a mechanic in the servicing of aircraft and as a builder, with his son Jerry, of both airplanes and helicopters. Jerry is presently owner/manager of the Gibbon airport and is still building helicopters and aircraft. He was a helicopter pilot in World War II.

Kearney's first principal air field was known as the Auxiliary Field, established in the early 1920's and in use for at least twenty years. It was located north of Highway 30 and just east of the Kearney Military Academy (present St. Luke's Good Samaritan Center). A system of border lighting was installed in 1921 when the Kearney landing field was charted as an official field for air mail planes. A rotating beacon was also required and was installed with the code EAR so pilots could identify the field. In bad weather a bonfire was lit to help guide night flights. Although the field was small, about 80 acres, it had two dirt runways, one east and west, one north and south. One attractive feature of the field, in the opinion of the air mail supervisor, was the close proximity of the military academy and the cooperation offered by Colonel Drummond, head of the academy, to house fliers who were forced to make a landing here until they could again take to the air. Early mail planes had the mail bags strapped to the wings, and three passengers could be seated in open seats in front of the pilot.

Birdsall field south of Kearney was another much-used airfield during the 20's and 30's, and again in the 40's. It was located about a mile and a half south of the Platte River bridge, on the west side of the road.

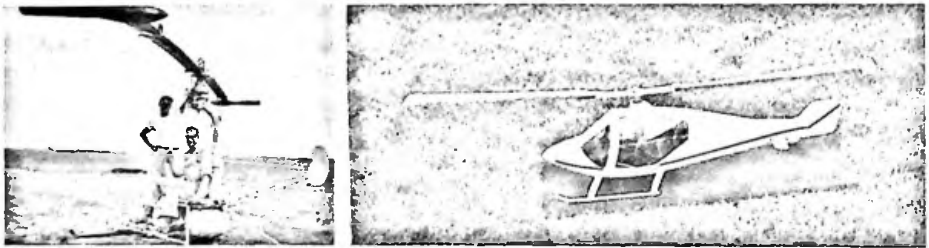
In 1938-39 when World War II seemed imminent, a federally funded pilot training program was offered at Kearney State College to prepare fliers for war service. Larry and Russell Litwiller taught the course at a field east of Kearney, immediately north of the old Auxiliary Field. This field had two or three hangars, four planes, and a north-and-south unpaved runway one-half mile long. Many young Kearney State students obtained their licenses to fly under this pilot training program.

Over the years several aviation notables have left their imprint on Kearney's aero-history. Charles Lindburgh gave Kearney his greetings on August 31, 1927, while enroute from Omaha to Denver. When he arrived above the city in his famous *Spirit of St. Louis*, he circled over the city several times at a low altitude, then dropped greetings in a small linen bag tied with a yellow ribbon before heading west toward Denver. The greetings, picked up between 23rd and 24th Streets on Central Avenue, were printed on parchment and signed personally by the famed young aviator.

Amelia Earhart made an unscheduled stop at the old Auxiliary Field in the mid-thirties. Ward Minor was the first one on the scene and describes the incident as follows:

"I had been in Grand Island in court and on my way home a helicopter flew across the road in front of me and landed on the airstrip north of the highway. I drove over to the strip and found a lady lying on the ground. It was Amelia Earhart. She was not hurt, but had stretched out on the ground to relax after the hours of sitting in the helicopter. Other people joined us, but Miss Earhart didn't get up, continuing to talk to us from her position flat on the ground. She was on an advertising mission, flying a helicopter for a company that had recently developed the plane. She complained bitterly about the flying of it—uncomfortably cold, too slow, and having to fly close to the ground. She had left Omaha and was supposed to get to North Platte before needing gas, but she thought the plane was not performing well, and when she sighted the air strip she dropped down to check on the copter. The late Jack Samway, Sr., who then worked for Bredenberg Chevrolet Company, brought out gasoline for the helicopter and got it running smoothly for Miss Earhart, who gave him a check for \$10.00, then went on her way to North Platte. The check was never cashed. Mr. Bredenberg had it framed and hung it in his business office where it stayed until the company ceased business."

In 1937 a barnstormer bought a plane used by the Byrd Antarctic Expedition and brought it through Kearney, landing at the Auxiliary Field.



Left: Walt May (seated) and son Jerry in the first helicopter built by them. Right: Scale model of Helicopter #8 presently being built by Jerry May.

In 1941 the City of Kearney began construction of a new municipal airport four miles east of town on the north side of Highway 30. On 532 acres two runways, 100 feet wide and over 4,000 feet long of 2-inch thick asphalt, were laid, one northwest and southeast and the other northeast and southwest, and the existing 4,500 ft. north and south runway was graded. The hangar, of brick construction, had a capability of eight or nine planes. The project cost was \$361,946, of which \$76,639 was the share of the city for land and equipment purchase, and \$285,306 for labor and material was funded by the federal government's W.P.A. program.

Named F. G. Keens Airport in honor of one of Kearney's prominent early citizens, the dedication on August 24, 1942, brought out a crowd estimated at around 25,000. The big attraction of the day was the air show by army air officers in Air Force planes, which the *Hub* reported "did formation flights, squirrel cages, rolls, dog fights,

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clover leaves and the like.”

William Knoll was the airport manager. Also on the staff was a secretary to check all incoming and outgoing aircraft, and the airport was under 24-hour guard duty.

The Kearney Keens Airport lasted only two weeks as a civilian airfield. On September 5 it was taken over by the Army for a part of the Kearney Air Base, and all civilian planes were ordered to vacate the hangar by noon on September 14.

SOURCES

Kearney Daily Hub, July 5, 31, 1919; August 24, 26, September 10, 12, 1942; June 15, 29, 1973. Personal Interviews: Wm. J. Knoll, Jack Samway, Ward Minor, Mr. and Mrs. L. F. Bahnsen, Mrs. Walter May, Jeny May. Photos: Mrs. Walter May, *Hub* Historical Collection.

NOTE: We are searching for a photo (it can be a snapshot) of the brick hangar at the F. G. Keens Airport dedicated in August 1942. Do you know of one?

WITH THE SOCIETY

Sunday, March 20. For the monthly meeting of the Buffalo County Historical Society, we have made arrangements to tour the Dawson County Museum, at 805 North Taft, in Lexington, on this Sunday afternoon from 2:00 to 4:00. This museum is one of six Nebraska museums with an interpretive exhibit on “Continuity and Change on the Great Plains,” funded through a grant by the Nebraska Committee for the Humanities. Dawson County’s exhibit focuses on the change in agriculture over the years, and is entitled, *Corn is King—Alfalfa is Queen*.

We hope members will pool rides and take part in this tour. Anyone needing a ride notify Margaret Hohnholt (237-7327) or Alice Howell (237-7858).

NEW LIFE MEMBER

Burton Mougey Kearney

NEW BASIC MEMBERS

Charles Oldfather Lincoln Jim Rempel Kearney
Ruth Godfrey Gibbon Gene Hunt Kearney
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