



Our Times

Volume 5 Issue 1

THE PEOPLE, HISTORY, AND CULTURE OF LOGAN COUNTY, ILLINOIS

Spring 2000

Come Fly With Me!

The Early Years—Flyovers and Unexpected Drop-ins

On August 14, 1911, Harry Atwood, the famous aviator, flew over Lincoln on his flight from St. Louis to New York by way of Chicago.

As a group of men on the courthouse roof watched, a little speck in the sky over Elkhart hill materialized into an airplane. Alerted by the courthouse bell and the fire whistle, people ran outside. Some climbed to the tops of their houses for a better view.

Flying at 300 feet and 30 miles an hour, Atwood put on a little show for the spectators. Doing a spiral turn, he dropped down at a sharp angle, before righting his airplane and flying north to the sound of cheers.

Pretty exciting stuff, but not to compare with what had happened in Mt. Pulaski the year before.

The Chicago Record-Herald had offered the Wright Brothers \$10,000 for the successful completion of a flight from Chicago to Springfield, the longest flight yet attempted. Walter R. Brookins, a 22-year-old member of Wilbur

and Orville's newly formed flying exhibition team, was to fly a Wright biplane, following the tracks of the Illinois Central Railroad. The flight would also be an opportunity for a race between an airplane and a train.

The train was the IC's "Daylight Special." Riding in a special car were Wilbur Wright; Roy Knabenshue, superintendent of the Wright exhibition team; members of the Aero Club of Illinois; and a crowd of newspapermen.

Surrounded by excited spectators, Brookins took off from Washington Park in Chicago at 9:16 a.m. on September 29th, 1910. Forty-seven minutes later, the "Daylight Special" left the Park Row station.

At Kankakee, the pilot dropped a note overboard: the machine was working all right and would make the trip OK.

Wilbur Wright had told Brookins to land at Gilman for gasoline and water. It was assumed the train would catch up by then, but the pilot landed in a cornfield 35 minutes ahead of it.

Farmers ran to his aid and carried the airplane out of the cornfield. Once the train arrived, gasoline and water were added to the airplane; Wright and Knabenshue checked it over; and everyone started out again.

Then the race between the airplane and the train was really on. Farm



The Wright biplane at Mt. Pulaski, September 29, 1910. Brookins had until midnight, October 1st, to fly to Springfield. He did it in 7 hours and 9 minutes, arriving ahead of the train. Courtesy Mt. Pulaski Township Historical Society.

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121 N. Kickapoo Street
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PUBLISHER/EDITOR

Sam Redding

ADVERTISING/CIRCULATION

Darla Hamilton

RESEARCHED AND WRITTEN BY

Nancy Lawrence Gehlbach

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Publisher's Notes

What happens to a kid who grows up with nicknames like Niggy, Rimp and Odd Rod? In the case of my brother, he becomes a supersonic jet pilot. Rodney Linn Redding took his middle name from the aviator Charles Lindbergh (an unfortunate choice for a first grader who had trouble forming the "r" and "l" sounds, but Wodney Winn Wedding seems to carry no complex as a result). Except for the middle name, no one would have guessed that Rod was destined for pilotdom. But then he was something of a speed demon; he had the first English-style bicycle in town—skinny tires and hand brakes—and he liked to spin the tires of his '54 Chevy. Rodney was slightly small for his age growing up, which was no handicap when he excelled in wrestling as captain of his high school team. Then he went to college.

At Eureka College, Rod majored in fraternity life, then transferred to Illinois State, where he considered the field of sociology, let his hair grow, added a mustache, took up tennis, and finally graduated with a degree in elementary education. Teaching jobs were plentiful in 1971, but Rod's sense of adventure combined with his newfound social consciousness, and he went to South Carolina to

teach first graders in one of the poorest counties in the country.

Rod was a good teacher, I'll bet—personable, caring, fun-loving, and completely at ease with the children of sharecroppers who lived in homes with dirt floors. But Rod was also not the kind to stay in one place doing the same thing for long. In his second year of teaching, he met a retired Air Force officer who sang the praises of military life. Rod, ever the creature of impulse, enlisted.

Rod graduated from officers' training, applied for flight school, passed the tests, and learned to fly. He did so well in flight school that the Air Force made him an instructor. He logged so many hours as a flight instructor that he had no problem getting a job flying commercially for Texas Air when he finished his six-year hitch in the Air Force.

Rod didn't completely leave the military. "Flying a commercial airplane is like driving a bus," he said, and he joined a reserve unit in Massachusetts and started flying A-10 Warthogs on weekends. He learned to drop cement bags on uninhabited islands off the East Coast. He mastered the A-10's weaponry, which included heat-seeking missiles that could find and destroy a tank 15 miles away.

Every summer, Rod, the weekend warrior, spent a couple weeks of duty in Turkey, where his A-10 unit was prepared to do battle in the desert. During Desert Storm, his unit was put on alert but never left the States. Then, during his last summer's duty, while in Italy, Rod took part in America's brief bombing of Bosnia.

Texas Air merged with Continental, and Rod has flown 737s and MD-80s from Houston to various North and South American destinations for years now. A couple of years ago, he retired from the Air Force Reserve as a lieutenant colonel. His military buddies call him "Colonel," and the Continental crews call him "Captain," but we still call him Niggy, Rimp or Odd Rod.

I have never flown in an airplane piloted by my brother. About 20 years ago, when we were living at Flamingo Heights, the kids ran into the house, frightened by a loud, rumbling noise. We all went outside to see what was going on. In fact, everyone in the neighborhood had gone to their yards, looking to the sky as a huge, green airplane circled our houses, spiraling lower and lower and then tipping one wing toward the ground so that we could see . . . yes, there he was . . . it was him for sure. We could see the gap between the two front teeth of my little brother. The neighbors applauded, and we all felt strangely secure, knowing that Captain Niggy, master of the heavens, was protecting our nation from his perch in the sky. SR

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families and villagers who heard the blast of the whistles gaped at the airplane. So did Wilbur Wright, who spent his trip peering up at the sky through the train window as the biplane pulled ahead, then fell back when the train hit a downhill grade.

At Mt. Pulaski, folks had gathered near the railroad tracks to see the first airplane to pass over Logan County.

Still, they must have been surprised when Brookins made an unscheduled landing in the Obermiller pasture at the south end of town (near the present location of the American Legion).

"It is the proudest day of my life," said F. W. Obermiller (*The Chicago Record-Herald*, Sept. 30, 1910).

In the 25 minutes Brookins spent first waiting for the train and then adding gasoline, hundreds of people got to look over the biplane—which lost a wheel as it took off.

Wilbur Wright handed Brookins the wheel when he landed at the Illinois State Fairgrounds at 4:25 that afternoon. He had made the trip in five hours and 45 minutes of flying time, averaging 33 miles an hour. He set two new records: the world's record for long distance flight (187 miles) and the American record for sustained flight (88 miles). The flight established the first airline route in Illinois.

Another unexpected landing occurred the next year. Fifteen-year-old John Anderson and his father were plowing a field north of Middletown on October 9th, 1911, when an airplane came down behind them in Henry Hink's field, frightening the horses.

Aviator Cal Rodgers had stopped in the middle of his cross-country flight because he had sprung a leak in his airplane's oil tank.

A crowd gathered, and Grant Heatherwick, the editor of the *Middletown Ledger*, took a picture with his new camera.

Rodgers was attempting to win the \$50,000 prize William Randolph Hearst had offered to the first pilot to fly coast to coast in thirty days.

On September 17, 1911, he had taken off from Sheepshead Bay, New York, in a Wright Brothers EX biplane with the words *Vin Fiz* written on the underside of the lower wings and rudder. The Armour Company was sponsoring the flight, and *Vin Fiz* was the name of their grape drink.

Following the *Vin Fiz* was a three-car chase train carrying Cal's wife, Mabel; a support team that included former Wright Brothers mechanic Charlie Taylor; and plenty of spare parts.

Shortly after Cal's emergency landing at Middletown, the chase train pulled up. When the passengers saw the name of the town, they said, "Well, we're here for good."

Coincidentally, Rodgers had hit a chicken coop while taking off from Middletown, New York, on the second day of the trip. He was held up for two weeks while repairs were made to the airplane. Everyone had had enough of any village called Middletown.

Rodgers took advantage of his Illinois stop to sell postcards and stamps. His wife had been commissioned aerial postmistress by U. S. Postmaster Hitchcock just the day before, he said, making this flight from Peoria to Springfield the first official airmail flight.

Although Rodgers collected mail to deliver to Springfield, no official records of his wife's being named postmistress have ever been found.

Once the leak was repaired, Rodgers continued crashing his way across the country, arriving at Pasadena, California, on November 5th. Very little of the original plane was left, and he had taken too long for the prize. But he *had* made the first transcontinental flight.

Winnie Golden remembers Middletown's gala celebration in 1986 when pilot Jim Lloyd recreated the 1911 trip. Residents put sheets down to mark the edges of the "runway," just as was done on Cal's cross-country trip. ■

Air Shows—and One "No Show"

Lincoln's first air show took place on August 22nd, 1911, when "Bud" Mars flew his Baldwin "Red Devil" at the Lincoln Chautauqua.

Lincolnites had been waiting for an air show. That June, Ted Blinn and Robert Haller had met at Lynn Parker's office to close a contract with the Lincoln Commercial Club: they would receive \$1,000 for two airplane flights on July Fourth. The men bought a Curtiss biplane and had it brought down from Chicago on the train.

Thousands of people gathered on the Fourth, expecting to see the airplane take off from a narrow field north of the Illinois Central station in North Lincoln. Just as the biplane was starting to rise on the first attempt, a rock flew up and sheered a bolt in the steering mechanism. Three more attempts that day were failures as well.

After an accident the next morning that damaged the propeller beyond repair, the aviator, Bill Wallace, returned to Chicago, just laughing at taunts that he was "yellow."

Aviator Harry Hinkley finally got the airplane to go up on August 8th and again on August 14th. By then, however, Lincoln Aviation Company's contract with the Commercial Club had expired.

Meanwhile, Lincoln citizen Lawrence Stringer had seen Cal Rodgers fly at Greenfield, Ohio, and the Chautauqua association hired the new flyer to put on a show.

When Rodgers backed out after his big success at a Chicago air meet the week before the show was to take place, Ed Gullett; John Lutz, Jr.; and Walter Niebuhr hurried up to the city and hired "Bud" Mars to come in his place.

Aviation Day at the Chautauqua was a big success. Because of the

weather, Mars wasn't able to do stunts. Still, he flew at speeds up to 45 mph, circled the field, flew over Fifth Street, and made a sudden descent. The three flights of three, five, and ten minutes seemed well worth the \$500 fee.

Thirty-five years later, on September 29th, 1946, Navy torpedo bombers flown by reserve pilots Dan Handlin and James Burns, Jr. of Lincoln streaked over Henry Bock's airport at quite a different air show. Crop dusting and a parachute jump added to the excitement.

In later years, former Air Force and Air National Guard pilot Marv Boss recalls, Heritage In Flight put on "some terrific air shows" at the Logan County Airport.



"Sentimental Journey" at AirEvent '88. Courtesy Lindy Fancher.

The World War II B-17G bomber "Sentimental Journey" thrilled visitors to the fourth annual AirEvent in 1988. A TAV-8B Harrier featured that year had some problems.

To make a short-field landing, the pilot put the reverse thrusters forward to slow the plane. The resulting jet stream caught a seam of the runway, tearing it up and chewing up the airplane's elevator.

Repairs involved replacing a flap and restoring the elevator to its rounded shape by putting corncobs on it and fastening them with 500-mph duct tape. The tape held on the trip back to South Carolina, even in a rainstorm. Of course, the pilot kept the speed down to 350 mph. ■

A Pasture or a Flying Field?

As a youngster, Naomi Steffen Sunkel says, "I think I about set my mother and dad in their grave," by sneaking out to take rides in the open cockpit planes that took off from her dad's pasture.

Naomi's dad, August, was the tenant on the Ahrens farm, which lay north of Lincoln and south of Kruger elevator, near route 4 (old Route 66). On weekends, the roads around the farm were lined with cars, as people watched the planes take off and land, often giving airplane rides.

Before a pilot could take a paying passenger, he was required to first go up and test the plane. "I was always close by when it was time to take that ride," Naomi remembers.

Customers passed through an entrance in the corner of the pasture, so of course Naomi and her brother, Herbert, set up a stand nearby—a big tub filled with ice water and soda pop and a little shelf where they set the glasses. They sold candy bars, too. Often the youngsters were joined by their cousins Vernon Gehlbach and Wilbur Steffens, who rode out from town on their bikes.

Vernon didn't get any free rides, but his dad paid for him to go up with a barnstormer named Schrock, who would come for a couple of weekends at a time. Vernon remembers that "we went up and flew around and came back down. It was not a very big ride." But for a kid, "it was fantastic."

As for Naomi, she had some of her adventures when planes of the Capen Aircraft Corporation were being boarded in the pasture.

Ernest Capen was a former World War I Army flight instructor who had come to Lincoln when his parents took over the Busy Bee Bakery. In 1928, he teamed up with local aviation buffs to form a corporation to build monoplanes and give flight lessons. Incorporators of the firm were Capen, Robert and Hettie Sheets, Al Ahrens, and L. W. Dowling.

Captain Capen gave flying lessons at a cost of \$150 for the ten-hour short course, \$50 for the airplane mechanics course, and \$250 for the advanced course in stunt flying.

The firm made one monoplane. The frame, fuselage, and parts (except for the engine, propeller, and a few accessories) were built at the company's workrooms at 217-219 S. Logan Street in Lincoln, in a building that had formerly housed a planing mill. Welding and metal fittings were done at the Lincoln Casket Company factory.

Equipped with a 170-horsepower Curtiss radial motor, the monoplane made its first successful test flight near Chestervale on May 19, 1929, and completed its first cross-country flight to Springfield and back on July 8th.

Not all airplane flights were that uneventful. In August of 1928, the engine on a biplane carrying Captain Capen and Carl Schacht had suddenly stopped, sending the plane into a nosedive. The airplane landed in a soybean field on the Dierker farm near Kruger elevator. Because Capen was able to control the landing, he and Schacht were badly bruised, but otherwise unhurt.

Still, it must have come as a terrible shock when Capen's monoplane fell from the sky on November 15, 1929, striking its nose on the Chicago and Alton tracks, rolling down the embankment, bursting into flame, and killing Capen.

Capen had flown over Lincoln College and was flying toward Kruger elevator when witnesses saw the plane begin to wobble. Two flyers who witnessed the takeoff and crash concluded that lateral control of the plane had been lost, per-

haps because Capen had moved the wing back fourteen inches to gain more room in the cockpit. Had he been at a higher altitude, he might have had time to regain control.

Five of the pallbearers at Capen's funeral (Homer Grove, Alvin Ahrens, Morgan Levi, Joseph Ritter, and Virgil Hooe) had been students in the flying school. Carl Hembreiker arranged their floral piece: an airplane of red, white, and blue flowers, with a gold propeller.

As for Naomi, whose airplane rides had frightened her parents, Capen's death meant, "That was it." All airplane rides were ended for her.

But the interest in aviation had been far from extinguished on the Ahrens farm. In June of 1930, a trimotor plane sponsored by Langellier Motor Company landed on the field. Eight hundred fifty people took turns going up. Seated in leather-upholstered wicker chairs, each with its own window, the 12 who were getting free rides for purchasing a car must have felt exceptionally lucky.

In 1932, Al Ahrens, Dr. Hubert Bradburn, and Donald Richards built a glider at Al's home on Broadway Street. It was a crude type of plane with an open seat for the pilot and an under-carriage that looked like a ski. Naomi and Vernon saw it pulled behind a car and launched into a low flight. ■

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Lincoln Evening Courier, May 16, 1936.

America's #1 Test Pilot

One day in the early thirties, a group of wide-eyed children watched as their teacher—their *teacher!*—went up in an airplane that took off from a field near their one-room school. The teacher was Grace Gehlbach [later known as Elizabeth Hobe Bjornaraa Spotswood], and the pilot was her cousin Lee.

Not that they had ever met before. She had seen his airplane in Merle Houston's field near Duff school (on what is now Route 10 east of Lincoln) and walked over to introduce herself. The teacher in the next school, Virginia Gants, also stopped.

"So he took the two of us up in the plane. That was real thrilling," remembers Grace. "Such a nice person and so handsome."

And so famous. After all, hadn't he won the All-American Air Derby in 1930? Flying the "Little Rocket," a monoplane sponsored by a group of Little Rock, Arkansas, businessmen, Lee had flown from Detroit to New York, down to Houston, across the desert to Los Angeles, and back over the mountains and the Midwest to Detroit—winning the prize by a four-hour margin.



Lee Gehlbach, touted as "America's No. 1 Test Pilot" by Camel cigarettes. Courtesy Rita Patterson.

The trip was 5,541 miles long and took 43 hours, 35 minutes, and 30 seconds of flying time, an average of 127.1 miles an hour. The race was flown in laps, and Lee led most of them. It began on July 21st, and he landed at Detroit on August 2nd. He was paid a salary plus 10% of the \$15,000 prize.

His parents, Mr. and Mrs. Henry Gehlbach, met him at Detroit, where he described the race as "a hard grind" and said he was "glad it was over" (*Lincoln Evening Courier*, August 2, 1930).

Lee Gehlbach was born in 1902, grew up on a farm between Beason and Waynesville, and graduated from the University of Illinois in 1924 with an engineering degree. Later, when he became a test pilot, that background would make him something special—a pilot who could determine why an airplane flew the way it did and tell the designers what needed to be changed.

By 1929, Lee was a test pilot for the U. S. Air Corps, having trained at Kelly Field at San Antonio. He had taken a leave of absence at the time of the air derby and soon became a commercial pilot.

Lee had always enjoyed stunts (aerobatics). According to his friend, Adam Bock, once Lee and Red Irwin from Hallsville, Illinois, tied the wings of two biplanes together and stunted with them at the Hooterville airport. So a career as a test pilot was a natural.

In 1935, he was testing airplanes for six companies. On a trip through Logan County, he claimed that test flyers have to be "the most careful and painstaking of pilots. The daredevils don't last very long" (*Lincoln Evening Courier*, May 31, 1935). Still, he said that he was always banking on the ten per cent of test flying that he admitted was luck.

That luck had almost run out on him twice within eleven days. The 24th plane he tested, a Great Lakes torpedo bomber, began to fall apart while he was pulling it out of a power dive. Looking out the window, Lee saw that a wing was gone on one side; the fuselage had gone to pieces; and everything on the other side was wobbling. Thinking, "This is no place for Mrs. Gehlbach's little boy," he bailed out (*News-Week*, as quoted in the *Lincoln Evening Courier*, May 28, 1935).

While testing a Grumman airplane like the one that had just killed his good friend Jimmy Collins, Lee put it into a compulsory spin that it never came out of. He had to parachute out; the plane missed him by 20 feet as it fell.

As if his normal workday weren't exciting enough, Lee competed for the Bendix and Thompson trophies in the National Air Races in Cleveland, often placing—even in the Gee Bee racers, which had a reputation for killing pilots. Lee and Jimmy Doolittle both flew the Gee Bees without any accidents, although Lee said they landed like the "Hammers of Hell."

Later he became a test pilot for the U.S. Navy, testing a captured Japanese Zero at the Patuxent River Navy installation. He also ferried airplanes overseas during World War II.

Logan County people got used to seeing Lee Gehlbach on his trips home: taking off and landing in the open area near the Chautauqua grounds (south and west of the present location of the box factory) and giving rides at the Logan County Fair. Unlike his brother Ray, who was killed in an airplane accident on Guam in 1945, Lee lived to retire in Logan County. He died October 1, 1975. ■

Little Airport on Route 10

Marv Boss soloed in a Piper J-3 Cub before he ever learned how to drive a car.

As a young high school student, Marv learned to fly at the grass strip at the end of Pulaski and Decatur streets in Lincoln, riding his bicycle over from his home on Wyatt Avenue to take lessons from former Air Force pilot and instructor, Ray Suiter.

Suiter and A. J. Brackney had opened a flying school and airport on the Dean J. Hill property (present site of the high school) in July of 1945. That enterprise was short-lived, and Suiter moved his operation to the farm of Henry F. A. Bock, located off Route 10 and west of the Four Corners (the present location of Wal-Mart).

In 1946, Lincoln Flying Service, Inc. was formed. Officers were Henry F. A. Bock, Bob McAllister, and Otis Morris. The airport eventually consisted of two runways (east-west and north-south), two Quonset huts, a T-hanger, and the tiny office where Betty Williams kept the records. The shop hanger sat just about where Burger King sits now.



Mr. & Mrs. Henry F. A. Bock, Elsie and John. Courtesy John Bock.

It's a good thing Henry lived across the road from the airport, because his son, John, tells us that "he was always there."

First, there was the flying school. Area pilots will remember Ray Suiter, Nelson "Red" Spicer, Vineyard "Whitey" White, Ethel "Butch" Jones, and Stanley Bright.

In addition to private lessons, Lincoln Flying Service operated a school for ex-servicemen, who could learn to fly under the GI bill.

Airplane rentals and sales kept Henry busy, too. Henry had ten rental airplanes at the field and sold a lot of Piper planes. Henry and three other pilots would fly to Lock Haven, Pennsylvania, and bring three tripacers home.

Henry's brother Adam remembers flying to Arkansas with chicks from Sieb's Hatchery and to Moline to pick up John Deere parts. Those were the days, Adam says, when "you could fly by the seat of your pants, with a map strapped to your knees and an altimeter, and follow the railroad tracks."

The airport was a busy place. Sometimes, says Lindy Fancher, there were so many people in the little office that you couldn't turn around. Often a group of pilots and their families or friends would fly to Springfield for dinner or Quincy for lunch. On one occasion, says Lindy, a group of 15 or 16 flew to the Ozarks together.

Otis Morris Recalls

Otis Morris says he had the same feeling about flying as Marv Boss: "We just had to get off the ground!"

Otis finished working his way through Curry School of Aeronautics at Galesburg just in time to help form Lincoln Flying Service.

Ray Suiter had been Otis's first real

flight instructor. Ray wouldn't use the word "airplane"; he called them "flying machines."

Ray rode with Otis just before he soloed in his first airplane, an Aeronca Chief, in 1946. After three or four rounds in the air, Ray said, "You're fit to take off."

Otis landed and let Ray out, but no sooner had he started up again, than Ray began yelling and running towards the plane. When Otis opened the door, Ray said, "I forgot to tell you something. If you don't make this machine do what you want it to do, it'll kill you!"

"I didn't know whether to take off or not," remembers Otis.

In 1948, Otis left Lincoln Flying Service and took a job in Decatur, flying to work every day and often using the landing strip on Orville Minder's farm. He worked at Logan County Airport for a time and has had a long career in aviation repair and inspection. He's had some adventures, too—like landing at the Logan County airport in a pouring rain, with only the lightning that flashed all around him to see by, after all the lights in Lincoln had suddenly gone out.

Lindy Fancher Remembers

Lindy Fancher's decision to learn to fly was made on a battlefield in World War II. Cut off in the Battle of the Bulge by the first SS Panzer division, he and seven other infantrymen fought their way out—but it took two weeks, and Lindy lost 50 pounds.

Just to the north were twin airstrips. "If I could fly," Lindy thought, "I could have gotten out of there in about 15 minutes!"

Lindy learned to fly in 1948, taking lessons from Stanley Bright at the

Bock airport in a J-3 Cub with a 65-horsepower Continental engine.

"Then I got real smart," says Lindy. "I bought a surplus airplane with a 450-horse engine in it. . . . I didn't have any problem, but it was touch and go for a while."

Lindy had a series of airplanes and seven engine failures over the years. Maybe that's why his wife, Vada, finally quit flying.

"I hate to fly, but I could fly or stay home," she says. Which she finally did—but not before she had a few hair-raising experiences.

On one occasion, Lindy and Vada took off in an Aeronca Chief with a gas gauge that read "full." Sitting side by side so they could talk, they got up to about 200 feet—when the engine quit. They were flying out of the old airport, where a mine tipple was right in line with the runway. So Lindy knew he had to get back down on the field quickly.

He began tipping the plane, trying to glide the airplane down, when Vada started beating on his shoulder, and yelling, "Quit playing! You know I don't like it!"

So there he was, with a dead airplane on his hands, and his wife "beating the devil out of me," says Lindy. Someone had wired the gas gauge backwards, so that it said "full" when it was empty. Once they had landed safely, a somewhat shaken Vada asked, "You weren't playing, were you?"

Johnny Charter had an RLA (restricted landing area) on Home Avenue, and his house was on the edge of the strip. One of the times that Lindy's engine quit was over the State School (now Lincoln Developmental Center), and he made a forced landing at that strip.

But Lindy's been lucky, and anyway, "I'm a good 180 man," he says. "I can go back and turn around" if the weather's bad.

Lindy and his friend Doc Carey once

took a trip to Chicago to buy supplies and ended up buying an airplane—a DGA Howard. Lindy had flown one before, but not for several years. So he asked Doc to fly the plane home from O'Hare.

They called the tower, and the controller instructed Doc to take off at an intersection halfway down the runway. He told another airplane to start at the end of the runway, behind Doc and Lindy, and three military jets to take off across the same runway.

Well, there were about 16 things on the checklist for the Howard, and Doc kept asking, "Where is this? Where is that?" Finally, Lindy, who was afraid of the plane behind them, said, "Just push the throttle down and take off!"

It took several tries to land at Lincoln. Lindy says, "That was the meanest airplane I ever saw in my life. I never made a landing I didn't sweat."

Vada says that on a trip to Nebraska, "they did dumb things trying to get it down." When it came time to return home, she said, "Go

home. I'll find some other way."

When the Logan County Airport was built in 1950, a Civil Air Patrol squadron was organized. At one time, the air patrol had a radio and a Link trainer in the basement of the courthouse.

Lindy and Vada were active in the Lincoln Squadron Cap Booster Club, whose president was Jewell Short, the general manager of Stetson China. The club held a huge air show, raising enough money to buy an airplane for the air patrol.

Lindy remembers getting a call at 10:00 one night. An airplane flying from Pana to Vincennes had turned up missing. By 8:00 the next morning, airplanes were flying into and out of Effingham, searching in grids. In all, 138 planes were involved. The airplane was found at 4:00 that afternoon—it had crashed into the side of a hill.

Lindy says the local air patrol scored 98/100 on the SARCAP (search and rescue mission) test scored by the Air Force and points out that the missing two points were due to an error in first aid, not in flying. ■



Jewell Short, President of Lincoln Squadron Cap Booster Club, presents airplane keys to Captain Lindy Fancher, Operations Officer. Courtesy Lindy Fancher.

Logan County Airport

As early as September 4th, 1929, an editorial in the *Courier* warned that “Lincoln had best stir its stumps on the airport proposition or the procession will pass by and leave this community off the air map entirely.”

The airport committee of the Lincoln Chamber of Commerce was investigating sites that year, but it wasn't until 1950 that Logan County finally got its own airport. Federal and state funds for county airports became available after World War II, and on November 6, 1946, residents voted almost two to one to levy an airport tax. Merle Watson, Carl Hawes, and Larry Shroyer were appointed to an airport commission.

On October 26th, 1948, earthmovers began breaking ground for the new airport, to be located northeast of Lincoln. The next week, voters ordered the county board to discontinue the tax, and the airport has operated without local tax money ever since. Its only county income comes from crops raised on airport land and hanger rentals.

After the defeat of the airport tax, an airport committee of the county board replaced the airport commission, and the building of the airport continued with the help of federal and state grants. The \$400,000 Logan County Airport was dedicated on June 25th, 1950, before a crowd of almost 2,000.

Elmer Lindenberg of Lincoln counted nearly 200 airplanes that landed on the 2,700-foot bituminous runway that day. The American Legion hosted a breakfast for 221 pilots and their passengers at the Airport Café, operated by Mrs. Lawrence Smith in the administration building (which had been brought over from the Army's former Camp Ellis).

Other events included the activation of Logan County's new 35-member Civil Air Patrol squadron and a demonstration of aerial crop dusting by the Malerich brothers and Fuller Seed Company.

Al Ahrens operated the airport under a lease from the county. Otis Morris was superintendent of maintenance, and Robert Hunter was flight instructor.



Beech aircraft Starship 1 sits in front of hanger rented by Heritage In Flight at the Logan County Airport. Courtesy Lindy Fancher.

Flying—and Farmers

In the old days, “If you said ‘Flying Farmers,’ the sky would turn black,” remembers Lindy Fancher—the organization had that many planes in the air.

As early as 1946, Bob McAllister and Henry Bock flew to a Flying Farmers plane-together at Purdue that attracted 650 private planes.

Farmers who had their own airstrips (called restricted landing areas) included Orville and Edgar Minder, Barney Mason, Joe Mountjoy, and Mike Drake.

As a young pilot, Dick “Pepper” Martin was a member and remembers flying down to the Shawnee National Forest with the group.

“If a farmer had a strip on his farm, they would fly in there and have a cookout,” remembers Dick.

Of course, there were practical applications to the airplane, as well. Soil Conservation Airlifts, begun in 1950, gave farmers a chance to study methods of soil conservation from the air—and also take a look at their crops.

“Any mistake they made,” says Dick, “they could see from the air. If they let a tank of nitrogen run out, there'd be a yellow streak. If they cultivated and happened to nick a row, you could see that from the air.”

Dick did mapping for the ASCS (Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service). Flying a Cessna 172 at 8,000 feet, with a video camera mounted in the belly of the plane, he and Melvin Constant took turns flying and taking pictures of the ground to check compliance. Following section lines on a map, they used roads, old fencerows, and hedgerows to get their bearings in the ten counties they mapped.

Henry Bock followed Al Ahrens as operator in 1952, and the airport has had many operators since.

Jack Dunn and his wife, Delores, lived in the administration building during Jack's tenure, Delores occasionally writing a column called "Plane Talk" for the *Courier*. After Dunn retired, Lincoln Aviation, Inc., owned by Scott and Robert Steinfort, took over the operation of the airport in 1973, "to try to keep it alive," Scott remembers.

Norm Clark and John Fuller bought Lincoln Aviation in 1975, and Norm took over the day-to-day operations.

"At one time, we had four mechanics in the shop and several part-time flight instructors in addition to myself, and we had a lot of students," recalls Norm.

Norm himself primarily flew charter work for businesses. In 1976, Lincoln Aviation got into the agricultural spraying business due to a severe rootworm beetle infestation.

Called home from vacation, Norm flew in to see the road into the airport "literally full with pickup trucks"—farmers signing up to have their crops sprayed.

"That's where I got introduced to the plat book," says Norm. That summer, the airport was "swarming with ag planes" hired by Lincoln Aviation.



Norm Clark at work in Hughes H-369HS. Courtesy Norm Clark.

Norm and John closed down their operation in 1978. Other operators have included Larry Steen, Sam Evans, Lincoln Air Ltd. (owned by the Doolen family), and Capitol Aviation (Jack LaMothe ran the day-to-day operations).

An attempt to establish an airport authority with taxing power in 1981 was defeated. Still, Sam Evans says there's been a great change in the attitude of the county board since the days when airport committee members were heard to say, "We oughta close this thing and plant corn and make some money."

In recent years, the county board has lengthened the runway to 4,000 feet, built a new office building, and made other improvements.

Over the years, local industries like Christian Homes, Pierce Glass, Cutler-Hammer, and Burwell Oil have used the airport. Sam Walton also showed up twice, once slipping in unannounced in his twin-engine Piper Navajo.

Heritage In Flight volunteers have run the airport since 1989. The aviation history buffs rent a hanger and the Camp Ellis building, which houses a museum of every military conflict dating back to World War I.

Modernization of the airport has brought a non-directional beacon (a honing device) and an automated weather observation system. But pilots still use the "Lindbergh" beacon, too. Brought here from its home one mile west of San Jose, Illinois, it was part of a nationwide chain of lights used by pilots as a "highway in the sky" before the development of radio navigation.

Norm Clark Remembers

Norm Clark bought a Cessna 188 and became a commercial agricultural aircraft operator in the spring of 1979.

Norm says that an ag pilot needs very good hand, eye, and foot coordination, very good depth perception—and some common sense.

As an experienced pilot who had been teaching people how to avoid accidents for ten years, "for me, it wasn't having to learn to fly; it was having to learn how to apply herbicides and pesticides and do it right," he says.

Working primarily for seed companies and fertilizer dealers, Norm flew the Cessna for five years before getting "bit by the helicopter syndrome" and buying a Hughes H-369HS—"kind of a hot rod" with a little jet engine.

As a child, Norm's daughter, Krista, used to love to ride to the job sites in the helicopter with one of her little girlfriends. The helicopter didn't have any doors, "so I'd strap them in real tight," says Norm.

Over the years, Norm's wife, Gail, and his brothers and friends have all helped him with his "nurse rig" (the truck and trailer with his supplies).

Ag pilots work long hours, and Norm actually went to sleep once while he was flying. He woke up to discover he had lost 30 seconds of flying time. His son, Brian, was helping him with the nurse rig at the time, so Norm told him what had happened and that they both needed to get some rest. Then he would find someone to take Brian's place for a couple of days.

"No way, Dad," his son replied. "Nobody's gonna run this nurse rig but me. . . . If you need me, I want to be there for you."

"I hadn't thought about an accident, and I sure hadn't thought about him being there, and I decided that was the last year," says Norm. He retired from ag spraying after 20 years. ■

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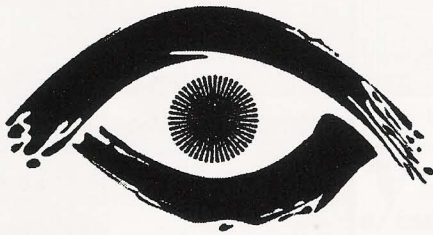
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Hanger Flying—Airplane Stories

OTIS MORRIS blames Lindbergh for his love of flying. On his mail route between Springfield and St. Louis, the aviator passed over Otis's school. Five-year-old Otis got a paddling from his teacher for running to the window when he heard the airplane. "She didn't recognize my obsession," he laughs.

DICK MARTIN's first flight was at Starved Rock while on a church picnic as a child. A "double winger" was giving rides from an island in the river. When the tall, skinny pilot asked Dick and his friend Jack Yard what kind of ride they wanted, they answered, "A good ride." "Boy, he wrung us out well," remembers Dick.

MARV BOSS enjoyed selling hobby supplies at Boss Drugs and helping members of the Loop-o-leers fly their model airplanes. Marv took pictures and gave out prizes (for the longest flights, for example). Sometimes the prize was an airplane ride.

GEORGE OPPERMAN remembers flying back from Camp Arcadia on the eastern shore of Lake Michigan with Vernon Gehlbach and Carl Schwantz and sitting behind Vernon, who was the pilot. Twenty minutes out of the small airport, he noticed an oil slick coming over the wings. Hitting Vernon on the back to get his attention he said, "Why is that oil on the wing there?" Vernon didn't say a word, just throttled down the plane and headed back to the airport. They had to ride the bus home. At Muskegon, George said, "You know, Gilly, we could have been doing 'loop the loops' all the way home and been there by now."

LARRY WHITBECK has taught many people how to fly. He says it's more work than people think it is, with most people taking about six to nine months to learn. Larry also gives advanced instruction. So by the time he has spent 40, 50, or even 100 hours with someone, he usually ends up being friends with them. Some of his students, like Alex Ulrich, are now pilots with major airlines and still keep in touch.

HANK SPELLMAN took his first airplane ride when he was about nine years old and visiting his grandmother in Oklahoma. Hank and his brother John had BB guns; their grandmother's neighbor ran the airport and had starling problems. So the boys spent their vacation shooting starlings and looking at airplanes. When the airport operator took Hank up for a ride, the boy decided he would have his own airplane someday.

Material for this issue came from the *Courier* under its various names; *The Lincoln Daily News Herald*; *The Chicago Record-Herald*; *History of Logan County, Illinois 1911, 1982*; *Mt. Pulaski 1836-1986*; *Cal Rodgers and the Vin Fiz* (Lebow, Eileen F. Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press); *The Great Air Races* (Vorderman, Don. Garden City: Doubleday); *The Shoulders of Giants* (Scott, Phil. New York: Addison-Wesley); and the memories of friends. Ted Blinn was writer William Maxwell's uncle and appears in his stories.

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