

Early Aviation in Rock Hill, Lancaster

Within ten years of the Wright brothers first flight in December 1903, stunt pilots were the rage. And it was Orville and Wilbur Wright who, in 1910, operated the first "air circus" using stunt pilots to entertain. Within two years the Wright brothers were earning a million dollars a year (with no federal income taxes to pay).

In 1913 the first airplane in Rock Hill landed in the area of Joynes Hall on the Winthrop campus but then was vacant land. The following year the York County Fair featured an air show in which the pilot dropped "miniature bombs," which were actually fireworks.

Described as "death-defying," the advertising was not too far from the truth. Pilots wore no seat belts and usually did not have a parachute. Walking on the wings of the plane or flying upside down was common. Some stunts featured two planes in which one plane flew directly above another and a passenger climbed out of the top plane and dropped down onto the wings of the plane below him.

In April of 1915, the "Greater Sheesley's Shows" came to Lancaster. J. C. Redding of Somerville, Massachusetts was flying a Burgess-Wright biplane that on the first day of the show behaved nicely, rising from a part of town called "Jacob's hollow" to a considerable distance while performing loops and other maneuvers for about 20 minutes.

The second day, Redding began the same routine but when directly over the Lancaster Cotton Mill village Redding "felt his machine 'go dead', and a violent vibration warned him of his danger." Redding went northwestwardly hoping to find a landing place. He did find a plowed field but had trouble staying clear of the electric lines of the Southern Power Company.

The crowd was severely disappointed that Redding hadn't completed his show but it was reported that Redding "remained quite calm after his thrilling experience and ate a hearty dinner."

Elliott Springs, a Princeton student at the time, was most likely not among Redding's Lancaster audience that day. But the day would come that young Springs would show his skill at stunt flying by piloting his plane between the two smokestacks of his father's Lancaster Cotton Mill.

Springs was to become a World War I aviator who was officially credited with downing nine enemy planes. After the war he was briefly a test pilot. In August 1919 he participated in the first cross-country air race between New York and Toronto. There is a picture of Elliott Springs flying his plane under Buster Boy d Bridge when it was dedicated in August of 1923.

There were no commercial air lines in the 1920 flying regular schedules. It took the U. S. Post Office decision to transport mail by air to convince people that money could be made by means other than daredevil flying for the amusement of crowds.

In 1930, John T. Roddey, a business man and former mayor of Rock Hill, decided to build an airport on his 230 acre farm as a commercial operation. The

fact that he had never flown in a plane or seen an airport didn't stop him from laying out landing strips, a mile long and 20-feet-wide, arranged like spokes on a wheel, around a central, cleared circle.

John T. Roddey persuaded the Rock Hill Chamber of Commerce to join forces with him in a publicity campaign that would feature the airport and draw attention to Rock Hill as a progressive city. On April 9, 1930, J. L. "Sonny" Phillips flew from Rock Hill to Charlotte with 100 air mail letters from the mayor of Rock Hill addressed to 100 mayors of America's large cities along with other airmail letters written by Rock Hill citizens and Winthrop students.

Every letter carried the stamp, "All the Way from Rock Hill, the Good Town, by Air." The concept of an airplane as entertainment by stunt pilots was enlarged and changed to the concept of an airplane as a transporter of goods. It would not be long before the notion of airplanes as carriers of passengers would take off.

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