

Aviation in Martin County's History

The history of aviation in Martin County goes back nearly a century. Fairmont's first airfield was a cow pasture on the Art Stade farm near Interlaken. The first airport with a landing strip was on the farm then owned by E. E. Leonard near McKisson Corners. It closed in the 1930's. In the early 1940's, a state licensed airport was in operation on the Stade farm for a number of years. The Fairmont Airport Association was established on April 3, 1944, and soon plans for a new airport was in the works. This led to a somewhat bitter dispute involving the Fairmont Airport Association, the City Council, and other individuals as to the building and location of the airport. In 1948, the city of Fairmont bought land for an airport, and eventually a bond issue was passed for its construction.

"Sunday, July 22, 1951, was a day in history for the city of Fairmont. With the formal dedication of the Municipal Airport, this city is now on the air map of the world, and within fifty hours travel time of any spot on earth." This was reported in the July 23, 1951, edition of the *Fairmont Sentinel* and marked a milestone of sorts in the history of aviation in Martin County. Amelia Earhart, noted pioneering female pilot that crossed the Atlantic by air, wrote to thank Fairmont for marking the city for pilots. However, the interest and history of flying in Martin County actually started in the early 1900's.

The first air activity recorded in Martin County involved a balloon ascension in August of 1894 in Sherburn. Regretfully, it ended tragically as a spectator was caught up in the ropes and fell 150 feet to his death. According to a *Sentinel* article from the early 1900's, the first "flying machine" to appear in Martin County appeared in Fairmont on July 27, 1911. However, the "birdman" in the flying machine caused a degree of disappointment as he arrived too late on the agreed upon date to provide a show. Consequently, the promoters of the event, the Fairmont Commercial Club, confiscated the machine and served papers on the owner. Sheriff Tuey Ward took possession of the plane and locked it up in J. H. Gorman's storeroom for the night. The Commercial Club then met with the owners of the plane, Mr. St. Henry and Mr. Hanlon, and worked out an agreement for a new flight date. The flight took place the next day with perfect weather conditions. The plane took off shortly after 2:00 p.m., sailed majestically into the sky, circled to the southwest, but was gradually lost from sight. Thinking there had been an accident; rescuers went off in the direction of the plane only to find that it had landed safely in a meadow due to a mechanical problem. The pilot was unharmed.

Other air shows, or as they were frequently called, "Air Circuses," took place in the late 1920's and 1930's and included giving rides to local residents. A July 30, 1929, *Sentinel* article stated that one such "circus" was to take place at the Ward Home Farm

located about one-half mile east of the fairgrounds. The event was to include Miss Nona Malloy of St. Paul, the “world’s premier lady parachute jumper who will make the leap from her plane at 2,000 feet.” Also to be included were air races, balloon busting races, bombing operations, and a complete orchestra called the “Sky Riders.” The headline of the August 15, 1929, edition of the *Sentinel* read “20 Pilots Do Stuff for Fairmont Crowds.” This article went on to describe the various airplane stunts and maneuvers, stating the attendance as being 2,500, as well as declaring that there were many planes participating.

Looking back at the history of aviation in Martin County, many names emerge. Walter Krause of Ormsby was an early flyer, test pilot, and said to be one of the most colorful pilots in early Martin County aviation. Vic St. John and Walter Ritz of Truman hold the record as the first farmers to fly to the state fair in their own airplane. Other names include Floyd Eltgroth, Roy Fuller, Jack Robinson, Ernest Thieman, Earl Gray, Dr. L. A. Degan, Carl Oltman, Reuben Swenberg, Cora Fuller, and many more. Cora Fuller was the first female licensed pilot in Minnesota. In addition, there were a number of local individuals that attended flying schools and then returned to Martin County to train people in the art of flying.

Among these early aviators, Lloyd Alsworth is undoubtedly the most acknowledged and acclaimed individual for making aviation a significant piece of Martin County’s history. Known as “Pappy,” the Sherburn native is widely considered to be the father of aviation in Martin County.

Alsworth was born in 1906 and grew up on a farm in rural Sherburn. He farmed with his father and operated an airport on their farm with his brother. Alsworth took his first plane ride at a 1927 air show in Jackson, and was hooked on flying from that point forward. He learned to fly in a biplane owned by Clarence Siehl of Sherburn. In 1931, Alsworth and his brother bought their first plane together, an OX-5 Travelaire biplane that cost \$375.00. They used a hayfield on their father’s farm as a landing strip, which was also used by many other pilots for miles around. This helped them to become acquainted with many of the early day pilots, from which they in turn acquired a great deal of knowledge about flying and airplanes.

Alsworth trained combat pilots during WW II, he ran a crop-dusting business, he was instrumental in convincing area officials to build the Fairmont Airport, and he served as an unpaid airport manager for twenty-five years. He became a partner in the Fairmont Airport in 1945, he began crop dusting in 1947, and he began spraying for the Fairmont Canning Company in the early 1950’s. He founded the Fairmont Flying Service which he operated until his retirement in 1975. This air taxi service primarily serviced short

distances within the state, however, he had taken passengers as far as Atlantic City, New Jersey.

Local aviation was not without its mishaps. In addition to the balloon ascension death in 1894, the first aviator to die in Martin County as a result of an airplane accident was Melvin Marple in 1940. Marple was conducting a test flight that crashed near Monterey. According to an article in the February 15, 1940, *Fairmont Daily Sentinel*, Marple, who was considered one of the most experienced pilots in Martin County, didn't seem to like this particular plane. The article went on to say that "Some of the people in the village described it as a death trap, but others said it had been 'okayed' by Rev. Roy K. Reed, 'flying evangelist,' who formerly lived at Sherburn but who recently moved to the west." Apparently, this "okay" preceded more rigorous FAA regulations and inspections.

For more information on the history of aviation in Martin County, visit the Pioneer Museum in Fairmont.

Roy Jeffries 1906 Cadillac, at Park Motor lot



1932 Travelaire Bi-Plane at the Fairmont Airport



Lloyd Alsworth



Fairmont Airport, 1960



Fairmont Airport, 1960



Fairmont Airport, 1930s



Fairmont Airport, 1930s

