

The Story of Tom Weeks and His Flying Family

(Note: The following is a story by Tom Weeks on family's history in aviation. Tom is also the source for a lot of the TINS that will be placed in this section)

I've written for the magazines . . . never a book . . . just shared family flying and *homebuilt* aircraft construction details.

From ' scratch ' here's what it was like to ' home-build ' biplane using educated guessing . . . ' iify ' glue rendered

from ' boiling down ' horses hooves . . . rutted roads . . . NO electrical power .
. NO telephone . . . extremely crude home-

made tools . . . And my *father Leonard's powerful torso, arms and legs.*

Weeks' family's 108 years of flying . . . allows sharing of these ' acid-etched ' bits of aviation . . . ready to ' leap '

into your imagination . . . while reading these rare facts . . . ensconced within the safety of your comfortable . . . non-

threatening ' sit down ' place.

Enjoy !

Tom Weeks

ELLING WEEKS

BY TOM WEEKS

AN AVIATOR AT THE BEGINNING

In the fall of 1909, a restless teenager named Elling Weeks cast aside his father's plow, released his horse and strode across the furrows of his family's Iowa farm. Not once did he glance back.

He intercepted a grain train and rode in a bed of shucked corn to Chicago, where he enrolled in a chauffeur's school. While there, he joined an original cadre of fledglings who pioneered the birth of aviation. Weeks and his conspicuous pilot friends were to become well known as the "Early Birds."



The Early Birds were flying Wright Brothers' Flyers and homebuilt innovations. The pilot controlled the aircraft with a forward canard, wing warpers, and rudders.

Lacking a seat belt . . he was balanced precariously in his seat . . legs non-judiciously . . poked out . . in front of its lower wing.

Close behind his shoulders . . two partially guarded motorcycle chains hummed, indiscriminately spraying oil as they drove the *hand-carved* propellers.

The Flyer demanded over 68 feet of wing to leave the ground. With heart-thumping fallibility, no favorable wind to assist, the under-powered aircraft strained to clear the wires surrounding the airfield.

The untrustworthy engine's radiator, often fuming, was at the pilot's right elbow. And its streamlined gas tank brushed the tip of his right ear.

If an accident were inevitable, the pilot would tightly ' grab on to ' the aircraft's airframe hoping the resulting impact wouldn't be too painful. And crashes just happened.

Frequently.

There was no room aboard for an instructor . . therefore, there was zero actual practice time before first solo ride.

Listen carefully to the other fledglings . . observe their shaky takeoffs . . uncoordinated turns, and crude landings.

Now . . IT IS **y-o-u-r turn buddy !**

Climb on the peculiar seat, lock your heels in place, adjust your goggles, gather your courage before sweeping forward the engine's spark control.

Then . . just do it.

My uncle Elling Weeks described to reporters after his *first solo in May 1910* :

" Unexpectedly, a delegation of Chicago citizens and reporters came out to our airfield at Cicero.

The group insisted upon seeing a flying demonstration.

No pilots were available.

I had never flown before.

*Against my better judgment, I decided I would give them a very limited demonstration .
. anyway.*

I planned to hop the aircraft a few feet off the ground . . then land immediately.

Just to satisfy them.

Unfortunately . . I froze on to the stick . . went airborne.

I was forced to 'zoom up' to escape hitting a string of telephone wires.

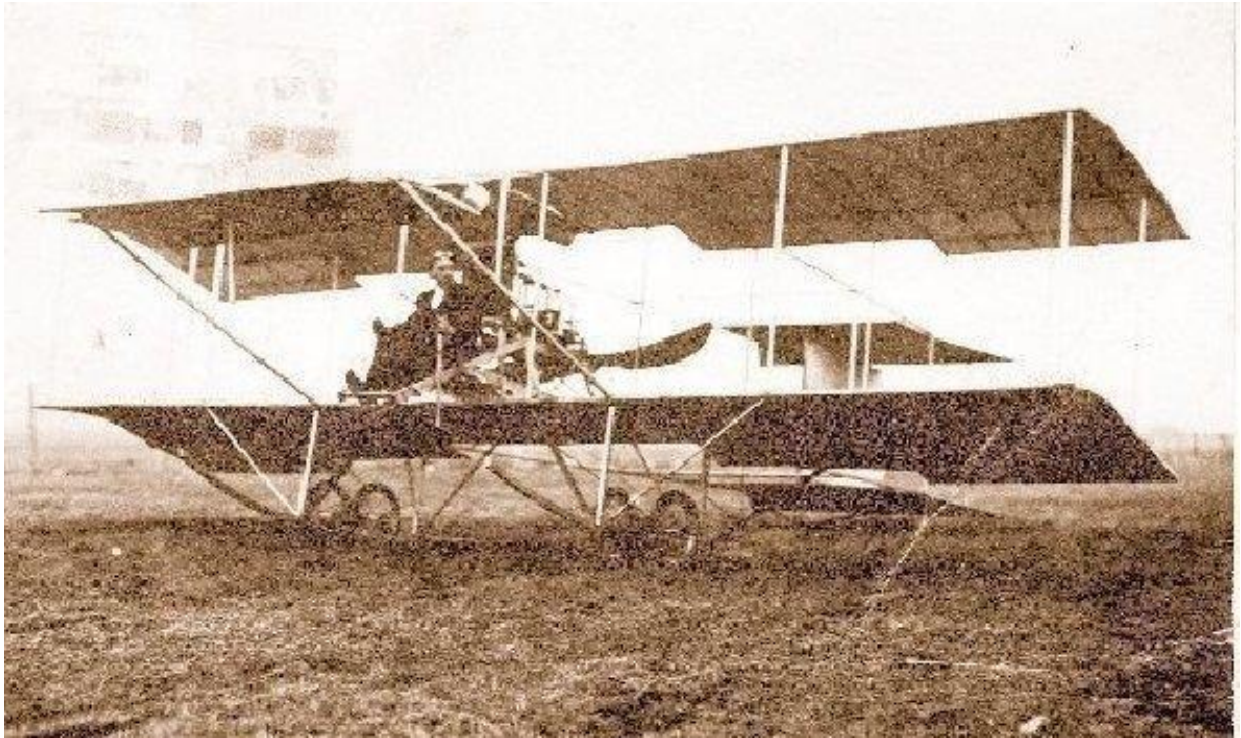
I had no idea how to bring the ship down.

I soared and fell for long minutes . . finally 'pancaked ' it in.

The crowd had the impression that I had been stunting.

And they gave me a big ovation . .

I absolutely . . did not deserve ! "



Flying was threatening and expensive.

Within a handful of flying hours, each airplane was crippled or destroyed, then rebuilt, scavenged, or salvaged. In their earliest days, standards of safety and quality control were unknown to Chicago's *Early Birds*.

Each of their airplanes was a reeking, oil stained patchwork of doped Irish linen, glued wood joints, flying wires, pulleys, and turnbuckle screws.

In order to keep the aircraft flying, Elling Weeks and his friends purchased odds and ends of questionable origin from nearby general stores.

Most Early Birds owned pilot license numbers below # 99. Because a license was not mandatory to being a pilot, Elling was in no hurry to apply. Two years after his first solo, my uncle earned pilot's license # 214.

His primary goals were personal high adventure and aviation records. The magazines and newspapers focused on Elling's exploits, much the same as media attention concentrated on the *early astronauts*.

In early 1914, he was the first pilot to carry daily newspapers between cities—the *21,500 yards*—from Scranton to Carbondale, Pennsylvania.

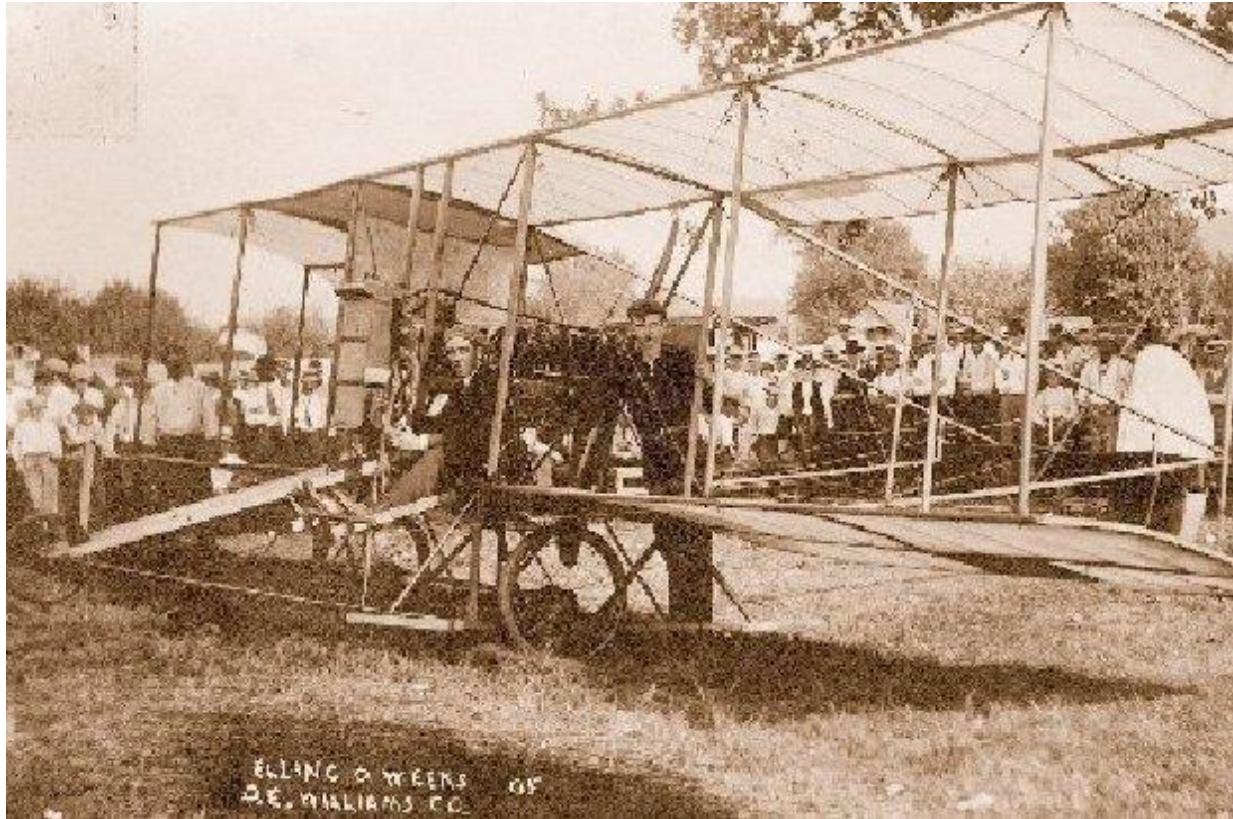
Elling went on to set numerous flight endurance and altitude records during the next several years. And he shared two implausible predictions with newspaper reporters :

“ Airplanes will become safer than automobiles . . and they'll be able to carry 500 passengers.”

His kid brother my father, Leonard built (7) seven innovative aircraft from *scratch*. In one way or another, each of the aircraft was terminated.

It was so risky, my grandfather forbade Elling's numerous brothers and sisters from accepting his offers of free rides. He didn't want to have two children maimed or killed in the same accident.

Dangers were real and appeared quickly . . from inconceivable directions.



For example : one cold, dry winter day in Pennsylvania, Uncle Elling was preparing for a *bomb-style delivery* of theater tickets and prizes over a distant fairground.

He was so excited about the flight, he neglected to cover his face . . with a chamois mask he'd designed with eye-slits.

Worse . . he'd forgotten to place his protective goggles over his eyes.

This essential equipment was just inside Elling's coat . . squeezed between thick layers of news-papers insulating his body from the cold slip stream.

As it turned out . . his goggles could have been a dozen yards away from his fingers . . instead of inches.

Shortly after takeoff, the slipstream's icy impact on his naked eyes made him painfully

aware of his oversight. Elling moved his gloved hand from the touchy controls to retrieve his goggles. Instantly, the unstable aircraft headed for the ground.

He groped for the control sticks . . wrenched the pusher biplane out of its diving turn.

His next mistake was identical to a pilot error causing thousands of pilots' deaths in future years.

It was *show time !*

An expectant and large crowd was waiting for him. In addition, Elling's debts were past due. And his \$500 flight bonus was in jeopardy. Ignoring the accelerating danger and the growing pain in his eyes.

He chose to press on.

Elling off-loaded the tickets and prizes over a throng of excited people at the fairground, then turned for home. The excitement of his achievement had momentarily drained away the adrenaline masking him from his pain.

Elling had blinked his wind-dried eyes, to the point where he severely abraded them. The constant blinking had literally sandpapered the corneas of his eyes. Nearing his home field, he thought to himself :

" Man it's . . cold ! "

" My eyes hurt so badly, I don't know if I can do this [landing.] I'll close my eyes tightly. Just for a moment.

To warm them a little."

Elling by this time, had severely deteriorated his eyesight and damaged his depth perception :

" I opened my eyes . . and I could not see a thing. Everything was a white haze.

I was certain I had frozen my eyeballs !

I started hollering at the top of my voice. I don't know why but I was certain that I was going to crash.

As I blindly headed downward . . praying that I could make out my field.

" Down and down . . I went.

And I still couldn't make out the ground. Then, I flew by the familiar tall, white shaft of the Custer Massacre Monument and I knew I was safe."

Several feet above a farmer's field, your great Uncle Elling Weeks . . stalled the fragile biplane into a granite hard landing.

The farmer found him, still in his white fog, stumbling around his slightly damaged aircraft.

Within days, his damaged eyes healed and he returned to fly a carefully pre-flighted repaired airplane.

But this time . . with his chamois mask and goggles securely installed on his face.

Years later my uncle confided in me :

" Tommy . . escaping death after I'd ' frozen ' my eye balls . . was the biggest thrill of my life."

The most extreme and *visceral-twisting fear* envisioned by any pilot is to be :

(1) *blinded*

(2) *alone*

(3) *pointed down*

(4) *hopelessly . . out of control*

(5) *with no parachute*

Elling had suffered through the *acid edge of a pilot's ultimate fear*.

With accumulated savings from record-setting and fee-paid exhibitions over uncounted crowds, Elling returned to rural Iowa to construct his own a tractor-style biplane.

With no electricity or telephones to assist, his efforts would apply new meaning to home-built. Wood joint glue was laboriously derived from ground up, boiled-down horse hooves strained into a yellow-viscous liquid, then kept warm on the stove.

To cover its fuselage, canvas-like linen would be hand-brushed with an insect-derived shellac diluted with alcohol. Many coats of noxious cellulose nitrate would be applied over Irish linen stretched to cover its wings and tail.

To power the biplane, Elling purchased a 400 lb. aircraft engine created by famous aviation pioneer Glenn Curtiss.

Starting with a primitive motorcycle engine that dripped gasoline *into a tomato can, stuffed with steel wool*, Curtiss had morphed it into a water-cooled, eight-cylinder aircraft, 90 horse-power engine and called it OX-5.

Though a startling evolution for its day, it suffered often from appalling results of poor quality control over Curtiss' widely licensed manufacturers. Ignition problems with its magneto, valve train failures and vibration-induced coolant leaks were too common.

Because the early OX-5's were so hard to start in cold weather, it was common practice to drain its oil after each day's flying, then keep it warm on a stove overnight.

Its flying wires had been designed for the military and enabled the Navy to have lighter and tougher rigging for its ships. These light cables were encased wires of hair-breadth thickness. Seven hair-like steel wires were twisted into a strand, then combined with nineteen others into a completed wire.

Substituting for earlier used ordinary piano wire, these cables were attached to brackets and turnbuckles to create structural bays between the vertically butted wing struts, and to secure the tail empennage and the bicycle-looking landing gear.

There was no electricity or telephones to give them a hand. And the nearest facilities offering machinist skills and metal fabrication required a journey of 85 miles on unkempt dirt roads.

There could be no errors on the carefully planned shopping list before making the 340 mile pilgrimage to Chicago, where aircraft parts vendors had begun to congregate at Cicero Air Field. It was becoming a one-stop center for “*do-it-yourself builders*” offering :

cured spruce and fir, nitrate dope, hand-carved propellers, aircraft engines and odd-shaped hand tools.

As a known personality from earlier years when he'd soloed, 'go-phered' for various aircraft builders, and acquired hands-on experience, Elling had a serendipitous advantage. And he knew the necessary questions to ask.

And quickly identified who he could ask



It wasn't that difficult for Elling to gain assistance from other builders there. Other than pertinent information 'stone walled' by the litigious Wright Brothers, Cicero's aircraft builders willingly shared their knowledge.



Perhaps a [overnight frozen . . while still liquid glue] morphed joint . . caused a dramatic farewell to Elling's first experiment.



Luckily, no one was seriously injured. On the other hand, during the ensuing decades, Elling and my father Leonard went on to build a half-dozen less errant . . . more sophisticated aircraft.

After setting numerous flight records in Florida, Pennsylvania, and Colorado, Elling



opened a flying school in Milwaukee.

When I was 16, my first airplane ride was with one of Elling's instructors. I told him : " *I'd like to see a stall and a spin.* " I relished the thrills. But my stomach committed treason.

On occasion he and I flew together. Flying with uncle Elling . . was like sitting on the same piano stool,

playing a musical duet . . with an



ancient uncle.

I bought a two-seat Cessna and proceeded to slightly wreck it, twice, using my uncle's ' push the edge ' style of flying. No one would take the responsibility of teaching me aerobatics . . so I mail-ordered an instruction book, then flew each chapter.

Live.

Several months later, I had a mind-bending experience inside a Lake Michigan line squall [Google : *Tom Weeks . . Caught In A Thunderstorm*] inspiring a very temporary attitude change away . . from random risk.

I took longer cross-countries, flying at night . . then often scud-running in teeth-clenching visibility . . between Wisconsin, New York, Florida . . . finally hop-scotching across the Caribbean to Havana, Cuba [within gliding range of tramps and other ocean-going sail boats.]

Returning to tiny Key West was the problem. In lacteous haze, with a dead radio . . . but an accurate fluid compass . . . and quadruple-calculated E6B cross-wind drift and ground speed . . . allowing exactly [72] seventy-two minutes . . . to find the 4 mile wide island.

Or slink back to Cuba.

After a wide-eyed hour . . . close above cross-hatched . . . swells, I pondered :

"There' s a time for courage.

But . . . there's a time . . . to slink ! "

The correct island loomed out of the soup. I landed straight in at Key West with two light aircraft touching down directly behind me.

Without my knowledge, in Havana airport's flight planning room . . . two pilots copied my flight plan. Then keeping me in sight, in the IFR quality visibility . . . they followed me close above . . . a deep Atlantic corner . . . within . . . a truly ' eyes wide-open . . . scud run.'

I've often considered : "*If I'd failed to locate the island . . . I wonder what . . . they would have done next ? "*

While refueling at an obsolete military base, a jet fighter took off then streaked by on a high speed pass, pilot giving an illegal airshow to his family. When its sound slap seized everyone's stark attention, the pilot forced the Sabre up a vertical line, pushed left stick to full detent, then aileron rolled ' til it vanished in a pinpoint.

Two years later, I graduated from fighter school in an F-86 Sabre, from the same assembly line of the sleek jet fighter that'd absconded with my heart.

The swept wing Sabre could muscle its way through the speed of sound. And it flew like no other aircraft I'd ever flown . . . flying effortlessly in nearly any position. And ' wearing ' that Sabre jet . . . became a joyous, 3-dimensional dance of agility and power . . . at *blurring* speed.



Its fighter mission commanded each fighter pilot's attention. Particularly the mock dog fights. Each and every fighter jock' manic-depressive about aerial combat maneuvers, experiencing either the ebullience of victory, or the miserable pit of defeat. And until he dies, every ' dog fight ' pilot has acid-etched memories of these intense maneuvers.

The experience is so awesome, adventures are willing to pay up to \$18,000 for a 45 minute simulated dog fight in a former Soviet supersonic fighter. An additional charge for afterburner fuel costs around \$ 4,200, but earns a speed boost to Mach 3.

During the Korean truce, I flew the Sabre on fighter missions between the Phillipines, Taiwan, Korea and Japan, policing a fragile peace on the Eastern edge of the World.

Off duty, I piloted helicopters and artillery observation aircraft with Marine And Army

pilot friends.

On weekends, I flew multi-engine aircraft and a Lockheed TBird on long over-water odysseys throughout the Far East. The combined experiences were a kin to a youngster being accidentally locked inside a huge toy store, equipped with an ice cream machine.

When I rotated back to the States, there weren't any fighter assignments available. In my view, I was misassigned to the USAF jet instructor school. An effective instructor needs to allow the student to do nearly all of the flying. I felt my own skills were still inadequate. I wanted to become a more effective pilot myself. Fortunately, I was able to change direction to become a maintenance jet test pilot.

Later, as Chief Test Pilot for a major USAF Base, I was able to make make test pilots' lives more fascinating. When possible, I scheduled routine test flights to be completed simultaneously. We would rendezvous in the assigned test area and meet head on. The air duels began. These authentic attacks were very competitive.

In untrammelled skies above remote West Texas plains, these high-speed encounters . . . *filled* our lives with excitement.

At age 25, I utilized the G.I. Bill to attend college. Although I earned an academic scholarship for graduate study, I was gradually falling into debt. I discovered the high wages being paid to pilots willing to fly under power lines. I'd always been comfortable with flying low, a technique I'd used to stay awake on long cross-countries, or when flying in impaired visibility. I landed a job as a crop duster. For two seasons, between college terms, I reduced populations of insects.

Our two decade old machines were converted military airplanes, not adequately designed to defend our bodies or deliver emergency power. If an engine failed, we needed two or three seconds to dump the deadly [now illegal] insecticide. At 120 feet per second, in a continual close encounter environment of guy wires and poles, errors were lethal.

On the other hand, random risk is part of every crop duster's livelihood. To reduce risk, I held to a rule to never fly while sick with methyl-parathion inhalation, fly an overloaded airplane, or use powerful wing lights to fly underneath wires in less turbulent air after o'dark thirty. I acquired special precise skills, didn't break any airplanes and erased academic debt.

A few years later, I drove several hundred miles to fly a unique stubby-wing biplane called Pitts. Coincidentally, it was near the tiny airstrip where Elling experienced his bizzare first solo flight. The aircraft was similar in appearance to biplanes he had piloted.

The Pitts biplane, however, was the premier airshow and aerobatic contest-winning aircraft in the country. By using engine-induced gyroscopics, this diminutive and tuff airplane would actually tumble through the sky, engine-over-tail, without experiencing structural damage.

This airplane deserves stronger accolades. In terms of pilot satisfaction . . the ' tuff ' little Pitts offered an embodiment of an aviator's soaring spirit.



Then for over a decade, I flew Unlimited Aerobatics U.S. Champion Debbie Rihn's carbon fibre wing Extra 300 and 265 hp. Pitts S2B . . wired directly to my soul.



My nephew Scott has been carrying on our family's unbroken chain of pilots. Scotty and I have been flying together since he was 4 feet tall, sitting on my lap, zooming along with a grin on his face.

After 25,000 hours, from towing ' Drink Pepsi ' banners, hauling movie stars and royalty, precisely navigating Artic weather inside Green-land's fjords and captaining 747's . . about to retire Scotty flies as a Senior Captain for United Airlines.

Unlike both uncles, Scotty hasn't scratched a wing tip. However, he's dodged his share of disasters.

Just over half-way to Hawaii, on Scott's initial flight as Captain, his 747's nearest starboard engine lost its oil pressure. He was forced to shut it down.



At that point . . . lack of remaining fuel disallowed a safe return to the U.S. mainland. Without a complete and balanced set of engine-thrust reversers to aid braking, his destination runway was now . . . too short. He declared an emergency and requested use of the longest runway in the Hawaiian Islands.

Approach Control cleared the 7-story tall Boeing to Honolulu's extra long runway.

Unfortunately, there was a stiff 40 knot cross-wind at 90 degrees on that runway. On final approach, the aircraft would be forced into a severe crab to maintain its direction. Touching down, at the cross-wind imposed severe angle, could detonate the rear tires on its huge landing wheel trucks.

Even worse, if the massive aircraft were blown off into the grass, unbelievable forces would combine to torque the 747's gear into multi-million dollar wing roots. Time for an unusual landing technique.

When the flight engineer shouted the radio altimeter readings : " 100 . . 50 . . . now 30 feet ! "

Nephew Scotty kick-turned the Boeing's wing-like 32 foot rudder . . straightened out the aircraft's direction and ' stuck ' the ponderous machine on the runway. For professional pilot, it was just another interesting journey.

As Scott and I consider our 108 year family history as professional pilots, there is a certain pride, but also humility. Flying will eventually humble the arrogant pilot.

If Elling were alive today, he would be gratified to see an unbroken family chain of pilots forwarding the heritage he'd initiated over a hundred years earlier . . with his involuntary wild solo . . in a Wright-style pusher ' ship.'

Tom Weeks

Source : Yellowed news clips, family notes, letters and Experimental Aircraft Association founder Paul Poberezny's invisible hand.