

1911 Aviation Firsts

By Wally Waits

Muskogee's 1911 Free State Fair was the scene of several firsts in Oklahoma's aviation history.

The story begins with the Muskogee Commercial Club, the forerunner of today's Chamber of Commerce. The club contracted with the Curtiss Aeroplane Company to send a biplane to the fair. The Curtiss aircraft, a Model D, had a single propeller in the back. This "pusher" plane was scheduled to make at least three afternoon flights each day during the fair, Oct. 9 - 14.

Originally, Hugh Robinson was to be the pilot, but the company at the last minute sent their youngest pilot, Beckwith Havens. He probably arrived by train and was able to make at least one flight Monday afternoon, the first day of the fair. The "paddock," i.e., the center of the race track on the fairgrounds, was used for the landing field.

Miss Olive Adair, the society reporter for the Muskogee Daily Phoenix, interviewed Havens. She learned that "Becky," as he was called, was 21 years old, having just the previous May received his pilot's license. She learned that he had already survived several crashes. Miss Adair said she found Havens to be "one of the best" pilots flying.

After asking about several of his exciting adventures, Olive asked if Becky would take her for a ride as a passenger. This posed a problem with Havens because his aircraft only had one seat: the pilot's. He agreed provided the weather remained calm.

Between flights the next day, Havens and his assistants improvised a second seat for a passenger. Then late on Tuesday afternoon, after he had already flown the contracted three flights for the day, Havens decided to make a trial flight to test the new seat before he took Olive aloft. Being cautious, Havens asked his second assistant, "Tommy," to ride in the new passenger seat located slightly to the right and behind the pilot's seat. Olive had come prepared to be the first passenger, but had to watch as Havens took off without her. Tommy thereby became the first *passenger* to fly in the state.

The flight did not go well. The engine ran rough after ignition. The Curtiss bi-plane started down the paddock ground gradually gaining speed. Then it rose slowly into the air. The test flight was expected to be a short one because all flights were less than a half hour in length.

After circling over the fairgrounds a time or two, Havens set a course that took him and his mechanic away from town. When Havens failed to reappear at the fairgrounds watchers became concerned that there had been a crash. Tom Smith, president of a real estate firm, offered to go looking for the plane in his automobile. With Smith at the wheel, searchers found Havens and the mechanic in the middle of a country road.

Havens had flown southwest to the Muskogee Oil Field where he buzzed an oil derrick and then over a pool of oil. The engine misfiring got worse, probably because of water mixed in the gasoline. Finally, Havens was forced to land two miles south of Muskogee. He just barely missed a fence in the process.

When the search party arrived, Havens was about to take off again to return to the fairgrounds. The approaching darkness prompted the searchers to urge the

pilot to wait for daylight. A tarpaulin to cover the plane was brought out from the fairgrounds and a guard was posted for the night.

Havens made no additional attempts to carry a passenger on a flight during the fair. There are two possible reasons. The passenger seat may have proved to be unsafe. Or else, the aircraft did not have enough lifting capacity for carrying passengers.

Earlier that same Tuesday, the Phoenix newspaper office received a phone call from a man at the fairgrounds who said he was an aviator. Leonard W. Bonney had arrived in town in a Missouri, Kansas and Texas Railway boxcar with a Wright Brothers biplane he called "Miss Cheyenne." Bonney and his plane had arrived uninvited, but the Commercial Club welcomed it at the fair.

Bonney's arrival produced another "first" in Oklahoma aviation during the fair. There were now two "heavier-than-air" planes in one location in Oklahoma and later there would be two in the air at the same time as well. This resulted in the state's first aviation "meet" occurring.

Interestingly, Cal Rodgers was expected to arrive during fair week. Like Bonney, he was flying a Wright Brothers plane. His arrival would have also resulted in the state's first meet. Unfortunately, Rodgers in his "Vin Fiz" airplane was delayed. He arrived the week after the fair ended.

During the next four days, both the Curtiss plane and the Wright Brothers aircraft gave exhibition flights that demonstrated their respective strengths. Havens' plane was lighter and smaller than the Wright Brothers. Because the Curtiss plane was more advanced in design, it made sharper turns and flew higher.

The Wright Brothers started selling their improved Model B twin propeller, pusher biplane in 1910. The new plane was big enough to now have two seats facing forward with the pilot sitting in the left seat, a practice that continues today. In design, the plane resembled the original Kitty Hawk flier. Bonney made more gliding descents. The bigger wings of the Wright Brothers airplane allowed for slower flights.

The spectators were amazed in seeing machines flying in the sky overhead. Some of the younger fair attendees went so far as to lie on the ground so that they would not miss a moment of the aerial shows.

Wednesday was the day a bet was won. While riding to the fairgrounds, A. J. Emery, a Food Service Inspector from the Oklahoma Health Department, said that he wished he could fly. Hyman Otto Tener, an Oklahoma City lawyer, overheard his fellow passenger's comment and bet \$100 that the 219 pound state employee wouldn't or couldn't fly.

Bonney in the larger Wright Brothers plane was willing to give Emery a ride but there are only a few brief references to the flight. Emery likely had a short flight, apparently without any problems. Thus, Emery became Oklahoma's second passenger to fly.

The paddock area had been crowded throughout the fair because it was also the location of a four-story diving platform and a twelve foot deep half-barrel of water. Space was also taken up by two large tents that covered the planes at night. The area in the center of the race track was constantly a beehive of activity as diving men, women and a horse jumped off the high platform. Race officials

started and clocked horse races. All the while mechanics refueled and worked on the two airplanes before pushing them into position for takeoff.

On Saturday, after several horse races before noon, the attention shifted to aviation. Bonney took off in the "Miss Cheyenne" at least three times that afternoon. Two men had agreed to fly as passengers with Bonney. But, when it came time to sit down in the passenger seat, both got cold feet and suffered some good natured kidding.

Two young women reporters wanted to fly. Miss Adair had already tried to fly with Havens. Miss Kathryn Hull of the Muskogee Times-Democrat newspaper also wanted to go flying. In order to be fair as to who flew first, Bonney took a coin out of his pocket and flipped it into the air. Kathryn Hull won the coin toss and took the passenger seat beside Bonney. The Wright Brothers plane rose to a low altitude, probably about 500 feet, for a couple circuits around the fairgrounds.

This 18 year-old, slender brunette became the first woman to fly in Oklahoma. Only at the last minute did her mother learn of her daughter's escapade. She also became the first newspaper reporter to fly.

After Miss Hull landed, Miss Adair produced a bottle of Mumm's Champagne, and despite the fact that the fairground was situated on Indian land where it was illegal to have liquor, broke the bottle on the foot rail of the biplane. She christened the Miss Cheyenne. Bonney then took her on a flight establishing her as the second female passenger and the second reporter in the state to fly.

Bonney was not finished hauling passengers. On one last flight, he took a Mrs. W. L. Goodycoontz aloft. Little is reported about this passenger other than she was a

resident of Williams, AZ and was in town visiting friends. She was Oklahoma's fifth passenger.

The Three Rivers Museum has two photos of the Wright Brothers biplane at the fair. In one, Bonney is shown alone in the plane as he is taking off, kicking up dust in the paddock. The second photo shows him sitting aboard the "Miss Cheyenne" with Miss Kathryn Hull as a passenger while a mechanic is posed to spin a propeller to start the motor.ⁱ

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ⁱ Checotah [OK] Times, Oct. 13, 1911, p. 1, c. 3
Daily Oklahoman, Oct. 15, 1911, p. 4
Daily Oklahoman, Oct. 22, 1911, p. 1, c. 5
Ft Gibson [OK] New Era, Oct. 19, 1911, p. 1, c. 1
Muskogee Daily Phoenix, Oct. 11, 1911, p. 1, c. 5
Muskogee County Republican, Oct. 19, 1911, p. 4, c. 1
Muskogee Times-Democrat, Oct. 7, 1911, p. 1, c. 4
Muskogee Times-Democrat, Oct. 9, 1911, p. 1, c. 1
Muskogee Times-Democrat, Oct. 10, 1911, p. 8, c. 2
Muskogee Times-Democrat, Oct. 11, 1911, p. 1, c. 5
Muskogee Times-Democrat, Oct. 12, 1911, p. 5, c. 1
Muskogee Times-Democrat, Oct. 17, 1911, p. 5, c. 3
Muskogee Times-Democrat, Oct. 19, 1911, p. 5, c. 3
Shawnee [OK] News, Oct. 12, 1911, p. 1, c. 3
Three Rivers Museum. The Barney Williams Collection.