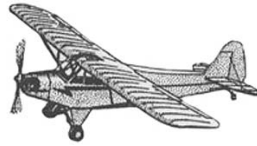

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DEDICATION



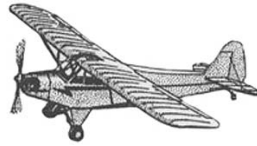
*"The Wright Brothers
created the single greatest cultural force
since the invention of writing.
The airplane became the first World Wide Web,
bringing people, languages, ideas and values together."
● Bill Gates, Microsoft co-founder and philanthropist*

The Civilian Pilot Training Program
(pre- to post-WWII) trained tens of thousands
of new pilots all across the U.S.
The airplane brought my father, Gardner Birch, to the CPTP,
the Grove City Airport and to the students on the Boards.
The common passion for flying connected them all.
Lessons learned while flying expanded their horizons,
their ideas and their values,
and taught them they could soar anywhere.
With my research of the CPTP and the students on the Boards,
with the input of dozens of people from all over,
and with the help of technology and the World Wide Web,
They flew Proud was created.
The story is universal, for anyone,
and no knowledge of aviation is needed to learn and enjoy.

This is for you Dad,
and your students on the Boards.



INTRODUCTION



It started with a question many years ago: "What ever happened to the Grove City Airport?" As I would drive home to Hermitage in Western Pennsylvania, I'd take the PA Turnpike to Interstate 79 North toward Erie. There are two exits off I-79 to Grove City. Once, I exited during daylight, stopped at a gas station, asked if there was still an airport and where it was. I was directed to the current airport, but nothing looked familiar. A large chain link, gated fence blocked a lengthy entrance; it was

locked for the evening. That was several years ago. I left knowing that this was not the airport of my childhood when, 55 years ago, weekend visits to the airport, the hangar, the men, the planes, the wind sock and taxi rides, created some of my most cherished memories that a young child of those times could have. It was my personal Disneyland.

Then in March of 2004 came a second question from friends who were visiting my house. They came into my bedroom and saw a picture I



have of my dad, Gardner Birch, in a military uniform and hat with a winged badge from the World War II era. Bob asked, "When was your dad in the service?" And by rote I answered, "He was never in the service, he trained pilots to fly at the Grove City Airport." I look back at the ignorance and ridiculousness of my answer! But as I looked daily at that picture, Bob's question kept coming back.

I couldn't discount or ignore that uniform! My father had died 42 years ago, having given up his beloved flying career 14 years before his death. And now it was clear; I knew nothing about that part of his life. In April of that year, I searched the Internet for answers to many questions, issues and relationships that had sidetracked me for years. I found initial information about the Civilian Pilot Training Program and even e-mailed an elderly former flight instructor, Chuck Franklyn, who had a web page about his CPTP involvement. And that summer, I discovered there was a Grove City Airport, listed with a phone number. But, as usual, life's events again pulled me away.

I was going home in October of 2004. The weekend before, I called the airport. Noel Dean, a mechanic, returned my call and informed me that the old airport, with its grass runway, no longer existed. The current one replaced it around 1974. Then he said, "But the Boards are here. They were saved when the old airport was torn down and list 127 student pilots' names and solo dates, from the summer of 1944 to the summer of 1948: 15 females and 112 males. And there is an 80-year-old who comes here and flies, and he says he was an instructor there." I asked, "What is his name?" Noel answered, "Rocky Filer." I knew that name ... from deep inside it surfaced from 55 years ago.

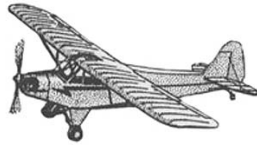
Finding Rocky, having him show me the

Boards (that were my father's creation), the old airport site and hearing about the men and women whose names were as familiar to me as favorite characters in children's books brought back a past I thought would never be available to me again. Few get the chance to relive part of their childhood through adult eyes. I was launching an intimate search for new knowledge of my father and his flying life related to the airport, WWII, the men and women on the Boards and our roots in Western Pennsylvania. Was there a story here beyond nostalgia? Had any of this made a lasting imprint or impact? Now in my 60s, I see life is complex, not black and white; everyone has strengths, flaws and potential secrets. Could I handle it emotionally, especially if the reality I discovered was at odds with what I remembered? Would the idealized, possibly naive, character picture I had of my dad stand up under intense scrutiny? This was a risk I had to take.

Over the next few months, an adventure unfolded spontaneously, like nothing I've ever experienced. I located, interviewed and became friends with about 35 of the 127 Board pilots (and met 15 at a reunion), then another 40 or more of the other's most immediate kin and many related parties. From these interviews, the Board stories in Part II of this book were created (a student is not written about if there is no information about him or her). Pictures, stories, memorabilia and leads began pouring into me. Local historic societies (Grove City, Greenville, Mercer County and Crawford County) had pertinent information. Humbly, I became the organizer only. This story, the pictures and everything about it belongs to the people and events referenced in the following pages. I thank them for their trust in me "to do them proud in the telling."

• Jane Gardner Birch



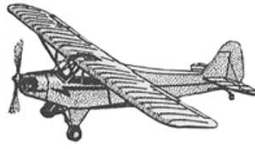


PART I:

THE CIVILIAN PILOT TRAINING PROGRAM



CHAPTER 1



Humble Beginnings - Lofty Dreams

Not everything of importance in World War II happened overseas. Yes, that's where the drama, bravado, horror and battles occurred. But overseas was only half of the history. Like a good marriage, forces abroad needed a partner in sync both in regards to vision and goals. The action was "over there," but the support and production were "over here." The United States triumphed in the Atlantic and Pacific arenas because of efforts the soldiers received from those back home. Not everyone could be active military, but all could be active. Unsung, and usually without fanfare, the average American, left at home, was vital to the cause.

Rationing, shortages, war bonds and FDR were all a part of everyday life in the spring of 1943, a turning point in my dad's life. It had taken five years using his quiet mind to construct this plan, paid for by laying brick after brick after brick. He was too old to join the regular military. But once the family bills were met and his first house was purchased with a five-year note, any spare money paid for a few more flying hours in his log-book (276 total hours/200 required.) Now at 33, Gardner Birch #66923 could list his occupation on the Civil Aeronautics Authority (CAA) form as an

apprentice flight instructor. He took his flight test at Grove City Airport in a Piper J-3 with a Lycoming 65 engine. Report remarks were, "Flight technique very good, oral instruction above average." He could now teach the cadets of the Civilian Pilot Training Program (CPTP) the basics of flying for their country's freedom.

Gardner Birch was born in Sharon, Pa., part of scenic Mercer County, in 1910. That part of northwestern Pennsylvania, abutting the Shenango River, is halfway between Pittsburgh and Erie and borders the Ohio Line. In the 1800s, Sharon attracted heavily from all of Europe, especially the many small ethnic countries, and the British Isles. Immigrants, with strong work ethics, arrived willing to do any physical labor in agriculture, saw and grist mills, iron and coal mines, steel mills, blast furnaces, on railroads, utilities, and many supporting heavy and light industries. The area also offered abundant wildlife for fishing and hunting. Sharon's economy has always been fragile. Per the 2000 census, its median household income was \$26,945, Mercer County's was \$34,666, and the nation's was \$41,994. On December 28, 2005, "The Herald" newspaper in Sharon claimed, "The future of domestic steel-industry jobs, including those in the Shenango Valley, hinges on



whether President Bush backs up federal trade regulators and imposes a quota to stem a sudden surge of Chinese steel pipe imports.” Bush did not impose the quota. “Bling” is only a word heard on television in Sharon; it’s not part of everyday life there. People tend to live within their means. Economic uncertainty breeds a frugality. Yet the county had a stable environment for growing up, with tried-and-true blue-collar values: work ethic, family, loyalty, frugality, honesty, integrity and helping others.

Robert and Mae Gardner Birch were just kids themselves when they married and had their first child, a daughter LaRada, in 1907. Three years later, Gardner was born, followed by Robert in 1914. Robert was a bricklayer by trade, but after the birth of three children, divorce drove a deep fracture permanently into the young family. The two boys remained with their dad, and LaRada went with her mother to nearby New Castle. The estrangement would be lifelong. By 1925 Robert had remarried, and he and Edith were expecting a baby, Barbara Jean. To help with family expenses, Gardner joined his dad in bricklaying in his mid-teens. He continued to live at home, paying rent each month and even paying for college for his brother, Bob.

Nothing extraordinary about this, it was the Depression, and you did everything you could to help your family. And when you could, you sneaked in a little fun. Dad had a good sense of humor, a natural curiosity and was social. He did things with the guys, and went on double and triple dates, as well as fished, hunted, swam at the river, picnicked, listened to sports on the radio, took in an occasional movie, played cards and



Gardner and Grace Birch pose together in the late 1930s.

went for rides in a car. In the late 1930s he met my mother, Grace Jones. She was the youngest of four children of Frank and Margaret Titus Jones. The Jones lineage was from Wales; the Titus (de Vries) line was Dutch. Margaret’s father had a large farm several miles east of town on what was called Dutch Lane.

When Grace became pregnant, Gardner married her on June 29, 1938. On January 31, 1939, Grace went into labor. The full-term baby boy was breach. Delivery was difficult. Dr. Dan Phythyon, put Mom “under,” then used force and forceps – practices that were standard for the times. The unnamed baby lived less than an hour. Both the doctor and my father signed the death certificate, which cited “trauma (to the head) incident to breach extraction,” as the cause of death. With



usual efficiency, Dad handled all details of the tragedy. Baby Birch was buried in Oakwood Cemetery, in less than 24 hours, with my mother still in the hospital. Mom, who had difficulty showing emotions, did not talk about this. She only told us that the baby was stillborn; she may have never been told the truth herself. "It would be easier on her." She carried the unspoken pain inside her the rest of her life.

At the same time Gardner was coming of age, aviation had taken wings. Not a single human being had ever flown a powered aircraft when the 20th century began. The first piloted, powered, controlled flight (by the Wright Brothers in 1903) lasted 12 seconds and carried one man (Orville) 120 feet. Within three days of Gardner's birth in 1910, Glenn H. Curtiss flew a Hudson Flyer 135.4 miles, from Albany to New York City, in two hours and 32 minutes. In 1918, U.S. Army pilots in Curtiss JN4-H Jennies, begin continuous scheduled public-service airmail between N.Y.C. and D.C., via Philly. In the very first airmail flight, the pilot misread his compass and flew 180 degrees in the wrong direction and landed in Virginia instead of New York City. The mail made the rest of the trip by train. Planes were drafted for military service in World War I by the Allies and Central Powers to do individual combat with their enemies. Manfred von Richthofen, often using a Fokker Dr. I triplane painted bright red with black crosses edged in white, became Germany's Red Baron hero. He was the most successful fighter pilot of WWI, credited with 80 confirmed air combat victories. He was ultimately brought down, and men of courage like Eddie Rickenbacker and Billy Mitchell become the United States' new mili-

tary warriors.

America survived the "war to end all wars." The Roaring '20s brought a booming national economy and flights that were headline events. Manufacturers increased plane speed and capabilities and pilots reacted with new quickness, endurance and maneuverability records. During this time, Mercer County's most famous aviator become known nationally. As a young boy, Oakley G. Kelly moved with his parents to Grove City, where his father operated a feed store. Young Kelly went to local school and three years at Grove City College before enlisting in the Army Air Corps, becoming a flying cadet, then a test pilot at McCook Air Force Base. His most famous exploit occurred in May of 1923: Kelly and Lt. John



An Oakley G. Kelly montage hangs at the Grove City Airport.

McCready flew a Fokker T-2 Transport from New York to San Diego, the first nonstop, transcontinental flight of 2,600-plus miles in 26 hours and 50 minutes. Later he would land at local fields (including Grove City) when visiting his parents.

Fred "Posy" Thompson, in his mid-80s and living in Erie, Pa., was from that area. He recalls, "My father parked me on the wing of Kelly's plane. I was 5 years old at the time (1926) and it made a strong impression on me that I can clearly remember 80 years later. That is when I caught 'The Disease' (the desire and love to fly). The field is about three miles west of Forestville and I think about it every time I pass by. There is more than meets the eye in Kelly's record. This aircraft was a state-of-the-art transport plane owned by the U.S. Army. It was powered by a 400-horsepower/12-cylinder Liberty engine. The pilot sat outside beside the engine. There was a second set of controls inside the cabin and the pilots could change places using a door in the left front of the cabin. The flight was made from east to west into the prevailing westerly winds, which looks like a stupid thing to do. Not so because of the huge fuel load needed to make this long flight. The heavily loaded T-2 could not climb over the mountains east of San Diego. However, when headed west from New York, the eastern mountains could be surmounted with full tanks. Even then, it was touch and go, as the liquid-cooled Liberty engine overheated with only a few miles to go. All available liquid (including urine) was poured into the radiator of the engine and they just squeaked into Rockwell Field. They covered 2,650 miles and used 593 gallons of gasoline."

In 1927, a tickertape parade with four million

people celebrated 25-year-old Charles Lindbergh's first nonstop solo transatlantic flight from N.Y.C. to Paris (3,600 miles in 33.5 hours) in his Ryan monoplane, *The Spirit of St. Louis*. He embodied conquering new frontiers through flight. According to daughter Reeve Lindbergh in 1999, "Overnight celebrity followed him home from Paris to the U.S. and around the nation on his tour promoting aviation. Fame followed him on his goodwill tour to Mexico late in 1927, where he met the U.S. ambassador's daughter Anne Morrow, who he married in 1929. They traveled all over the world as pioneer aviator-explorers, mapping air routes for the fledgling airline industry. Together they navigated by the stars and watched the great surfaces of the earth revealed beneath their wings. People still tell me exactly where they were standing when they heard the news of his landing in Paris. Generations of pilots still talk of his influence upon their careers."

The Great Depression hit the nation's economy like a bomb in October of 1929. When the stock market crashed, the small mill towns in Mercer County were spared until the aftershocks. Steel orders began to dwindle until plants, the life blood of the communities, were forced to shut down. Some local banks closed their doors. Many lost their jobs, farms, homes, savings and hope. There was no unemployment compensation or welfare. Families pooled meager wages to survive. The poor were poorer and many wealthy investors joined the ranks of debtors. Panic, helplessness and hard times cast a shroud, even in the Shenango Valley. The government had to step up under FDR and legislate a New Deal to lift the nation's spirit through fireside chats, growth and



experimental programs. It was a long, grueling climb toward recovery and normalcy. Interest and advancements in aviation were adrenaline rushes for citizens hungry for good news. Amelia Earhart made the first female-led transatlantic flight in 1932 from Newfoundland to Ireland in 15 hours and 18 minutes. Then in '35 she made the first solo flight by a woman from Hawaii to California. Magnate Howard Hughes sets a transcontinental speed record in '37, followed in '38 by an around-the-world flight in a Lockheed "14" in three days and 19 hours. There were many experienced WWI fighter pilots who were eager to show off their new skills. Many became barnstormers (Lindbergh started this way), flying into small towns, showing off their flying skills and taking paying passengers for rides. They got organized, and a series of air shows sprang up around the country, with air races, aerobatics and feats of air superiority. Flying was now local for anyone wanting challenge and adventure, and not afraid of the risk.

Right after his marriage in mid-1938, and prepped for that challenge, my dad began flying lessons in a Piper Cub at the Sharon Air Service in Brookfield, Ohio, given by seasoned instructor Judd Youkers.

From there he took more hours at Bernard Airport in Youngstown from Michael Kardos. The country was in recession; industrial production was down 33 percent and national income was down 12 percent. Flying then, as now, was expensive. There were no credit cards. It was pay as you go, with lessons of 20 or 30 minutes, and lessons meant giving up something else to get them. Gardner Birch was practical, not frivolous, and he had a plan. War seemed closer, and there was talk

that the U.S didn't have enough planes or pilots. After those first seven hours, he added 100 hours by July of '41. Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor in December launched the U.S. into the most costly war ever in terms of human life. In another 10 months (May of 1942), Gardner had 165 total hours while taking ground-school courses at Youngstown and Westminster colleges. And family life weighed heavier now. He had been a brick-layer for 17 years, and yet was just 32 years old. He and Grace were the parents of two young girls, with one more on the way, and had just bought their first house. Grace's father was dying of cancer and she was helping to nurse him. But Dad was focused on his goal.

On a parallel path was 30-year-old Murl DeArment, also a young father living in Sharon, working at Sharon Tube, and taking flying lessons from Judd in Ohio. The DeArments were a pioneering blacksmith family in Crawford County, just to the north. They made high-quality farrier tools that developed into Channellock. Murl's father was a caretaker and game keeper at the Huidekoper horse farm on Conneaut Lake in 1912, when Murl was born there. The Huidekopers descended from Harm Jan Huidekoper of the Holland Company, which had lent money to the government during the Revolution and had been paid back in large tracts of land in western New York and northwestern Pennsylvania. In 1815, Harm Jan moved to Meadville and took charge of the company's affairs, gaining prominence and respect. He bought up much of the unsold acreage, creating a large personal fortune, which he passed down to his heirs. Third-generation "A.C." (Arthur Clarke) Huidekoper established The Little

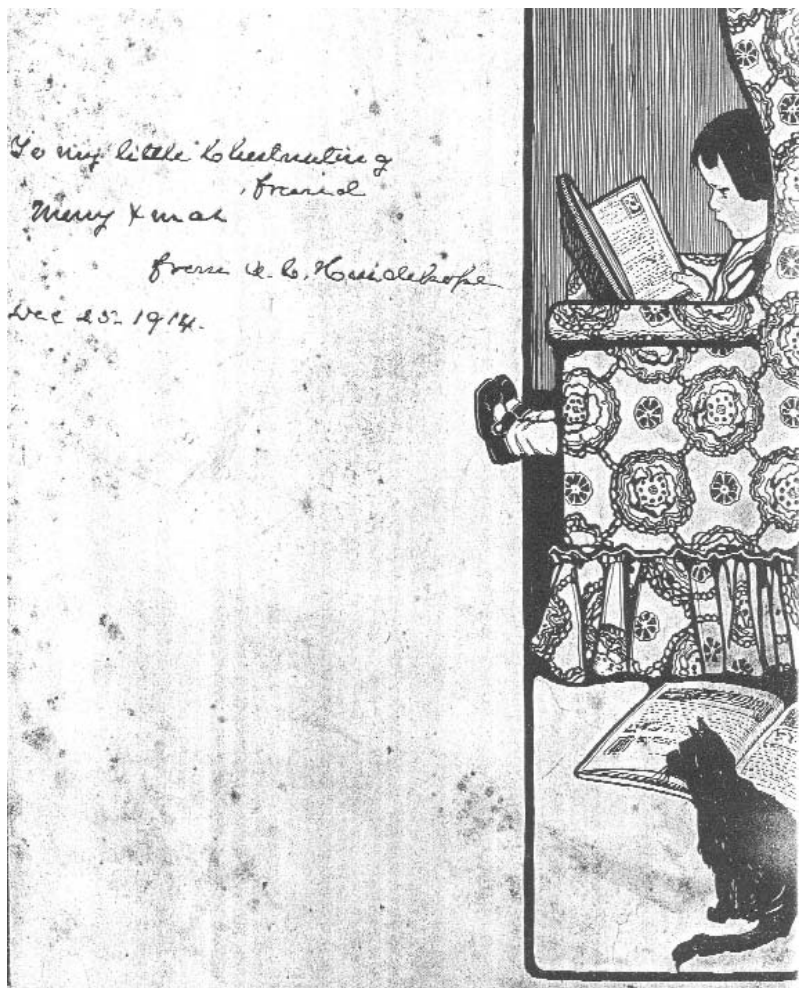


Missouri Stock Company, probably the largest horse stables in the U.S. around the turn of the 20th century. The horses were bred on North Dakota ranches and brought to Conneaut Lake for breaking, training and sale. For a Christmas present in 1914, A.C. gave toddler Murl (nicknamed "Fuzzy") the book "Little Rhymes for Little Readers" by Wilhelmina Seegmiller, and signed it "To my little Chestnutting friend, Merry Xmas from A.C. Huidekoper."

Fuzzy's family moved to Sharon so his father could find work in a steel mill in Masury, Ohio. At 15 in 1927, Fuzzy quit high school (like Dad) and began work at Sharon Tube, living at home and modestly helping the family economy. Within a few years he met Martha George from neighboring Sharpsville. Martha's grandfather owned George Electric, which was next to the Ritz Theatre on Main Street at Second. She and her friends got to see movies for free if they went through a door in the back alley from the electric shop. Martha and Fuzzy hung out in a crowd and began double dating, going for barbeques and for rides in cars.

On September 10, 1932, after Martha graduated from high school, they got married. Their daughter, Ella May, was born on June 19, 1933, and was just a toddler when Fuzzy became interested in flying. He started lessons in a Piper Cub with Jack Harper in Five Points, Ohio, then flew with Judd Youkers in Brookfield. Fuzzy, the steel worker, added hour after hour until he, too, had his flight instructor's rating.

Just 20 miles south of Sharon is the town of New Castle and a property abandoned and overgrown by weeds. Findley "Fin" Wilson, with a



A.C. Huidekoper gave a copy of 'Little Rhymes for Little Readers' to Murl DeArment for Christmas in 1914.

vision in his mind, leased the land in 1932 and turned it into the New Castle Airport. Fin was born on the family homestead in Princeton Pa., in Slippery Rock Township in 1906. At age 12, he saw his first airplane while living on that farm. He graduated from New Castle High School in 1924 and went with the tradition of the one safe profession: teaching. He was unaware of his instinctive, strong business sense. Enrolling in Slippery Rock State Teachers College, Fin earned 12 teaching credits and taught eight grades in local schools for 11 years. But teaching school wasn't as intriguing as flying, and when the



Depression came along, it wasn't financially profitable.

So he went to work for the Franklin Aircraft Co. in Franklin, Pa. It was a private corporation that used a vacant space in the Joy Manufacturing Company complex (now Joy Global, makers of mining equipment and a member of the NASDAQ 100). Fin got his first introduction to aviation at the age of 23 in 1929 and told a local reporter in 1983: "Flying was expensive, but I figured if I went to work at the aircraft factory I could get 40 cents an hour." He bought his first airplane before he had ever ridden in one, the Franklin Sport Trainer. This first version was a two-place, open cockpit, tandem bi-plane powered by a 65-horsepower, five-cylinder Lambert radial engine with a top speed of 100 miles per hour. It was 20 feet long, had a wingspan of 26 feet and weighed 850 pounds; only 12 were manufactured and sold. Later, five 90-horsepower Sport 90s were built, with a 120-mph speed. The test pilot at the factory taught Fin how to fly and he first soloed in Franklin during the summer of 1930. Of the original 65s, three owners died in crashes. Fin was lucky or well-taught or both. Suffering the effects of the Depression, Franklin Aircraft went bankrupt in 1932. Few planes survived. One known model, No. 8, is in pieces waiting possible restoration, and the local Experimental Aircraft Association Chapter #988 has a copy of the original Sport plans.

In the fall of 1930, Fin flew to Florida to operate the Fort Lauderdale Airport for the winter. At that time, the airport was merely a grassy field.

"During World War II, it was swallowed up by what is now the international airport." Next he headed to California to work for Century Pacific Airlines. That was short-lived; jobs were scarce, and pilots were laid off. Fin returned home to teaching. "In 1932, the school board went broke, and I taught for four months without a dime." It was that year he leased the airport property - a smart way to leverage his hard-to-come-by teaching wages. He opened the New Castle Flying School and built a large 60-by-200-foot hangar. Next he had to promote and sell. He wowed and inspired youngsters by landing on the football field at Slippery Rock College. Bob McGowan remembers skipping school as a child to see Fin take off and land on that field. Bob dreamed of flying himself one day, and he did. Fin enthused others with lessons. Among his flying students was Maxine Anderson of New Castle, whom he married in 1937. She was the first woman to fly solo in the county and was the first student to use the New Castle Airport for her solo flight. Both Fin and Maxine soon had commercial licenses with flight instructor's ratings: the basic requirements of the CPTP instructor. The hangar was expanded to include an office, an apartment and an ice cream stand that Maxine ran. On his own time in the air, he flew the initial mail out of New Castle. For that, Fin was rewarded with a nice pair of gold wings with a small mail bag hanging in the center. He was also known to bombard schoolyards with candy eggs from airplanes during Easter. Fin had built his first airport and flying school. He had tasted success and wanted more.

