

Now & Then in Ripon ... Looking back with the Ripon Historical Society

Flyovers once were more rare in city of Ripon

The sounds of airplanes can be heard over Ripon in late July as the Experimental Aircraft Association (EAA) in Oshkosh hosts its annual AirVenture.

This event, which runs until Sunday, attracts both people and planes from all over the world. At other times of the year, the sounds of the Wisconsin Air National Guard's F-35A Lightning II fighter jets from Truax Field in Madison may be heard over Ripon.

The sound of airplanes is nothing unusual today, but 100 years ago hearing an airplane over Ripon was something new. The Jan. 3, 1935, *Ripon Weekly Press* featured a story which read, "Z-z-o-o-m! A powerful airplane shot down from the sky Thursday afternoon in a power dive over Ripon, leveled off and soared upward again. To the amazement and fear of hundreds of upturned faces, the power dives were repeated. John Fischer of Mitchell Field, Long Island, saluted his farewell to the hometown and flew southeast. Several Riponites exclaimed to each other that Thursday afternoon's stunt flying over Ripon marked the first time a local boy had flown over the city."

The article went on to note that this was not the first, but the fourth time a local man had flown an airplane over Ripon. The *Ripon Weekly Press* stated, "More than 10 years ago Elmer Rutz made flying history locally with the first flight over the city in a plane piloted by a local man. He had previously received



YEARS AGO, AIRPLANES were not a common site in the city of Ripon. An early model of a bi-plane was added into this photograph of Ripon's 1885 City Hall using "trick photography." It was produced by Hartford photographer Harris Montgomery (1880-1944) and was sold as a post card somewhere between 1909 and 1917.

his discharge from the Army Air Corps and was on a barnstorming trip."

Elmer Rutz (1897-1961) grew up in Ripon and served in the tank corps in World War I. He became an Army aviator and after World War I served as a lieutenant in the Reserve Aviation Corps.

The Sept. 9, 1921 issue of the *Ripon Weekly Press* had a front cover story about Rutz and his new bride, Flora Kolb Rutz (1897-1977), traveling on their honeymoon from Oshkosh to the

Pacific coast by airplane. Rutz worked doing air shows for Lutz-Manor Flyers of Oshkosh and would be doing flying exhibitions on the trip west.

The 1921 article stated, "Very few aviators experience the thrill of returning to their home cities and performing for the benefit of the people with whom they have been raised. The hometown people enjoy recalling the time when Elmer wore short trousers and played hide and seek around the public library. But now, when they hear the thunder of the big plane, they realize that Elmer has grown up. There is always a crowd to welcome him when he returns."

It went on to note, "No matter in what part of the Badger state he may be 'stunting' he returns home as frequently as the weather and his duties will permit. On one recent occasion, it is said, he returned a little later in the evening than usual. The moon was shining, and the stars were bright. The big plane shot out of the dusk and circled over Main Street. The road of its exhaust brought people out of their houses. Elmer signaled for a car to come out to his usual landing field and though night had fallen, he made the perfect landing."

The January 1935 *Ripon Weekly Press* article reported that "The second and third flights over the city by local youths were made last winter by Charlton Mathwig and Eric Wahleen, respectively, both of whom received their commercial pilot licenses in Oc-

tober 1933 after attending flying school at the Boeing field at Seattle, Wash. When they received their commercial licenses, they were the youngest pilots in the northeast and received considerable publicity on the west coast for this reason."

It added that "before attending flying school the two youths had journeyed through most of the states in the Union on their motorcycle, before deciding that they wished to make flying their profession. At that time their parents had a hard time trying to keep them in high school, and as soon as they were graduated in the spring of 1933, they rode their wheel to Seattle."

Eric Wahleen (1914-1991) lived at 907 Woodside Ave. and served in the Army Air Force in World War II. Charlton Mathwig (1915-1983) lived at 508 State St. Both resided in the state of Washington after World War II until their deaths.

The fourth pilot mentioned in the 1935 *Ripon Weekly Press* article to fly over Ripon was John Fischer (1910-1983). Fischer grew up at 612 Woodside Ave., and graduated from Ripon High School and then Ripon College in 1932.

At Ripon College, Fischer was a part of the ROTC and received appointments as a flying cadet along with fellow Ripon resident and Ripon College graduate William Schaefer.

The Feb. 2, 1933 *Ripon Weekly Press* stated, "According to the terms of their appointments they will enter a class of 159 students at the Army Aviation Center near San Antonio, Texas. ... They will receive a ranking of lieutenant of the Air Corps Reserve."

Michell served as a lieutenant colonel in the Army Air Corps in World War II and received the Distinguished Flying Cross. Schaefer (1910-1977), who was mentioned in the *Ripon Weekly Press* article, became a dentist and served in this capacity during World War II.

The Ripon Historical Society is the oldest continually operating historical society in Wisconsin. It is open Fridays and Saturdays 10 a.m. to 1 p.m.

For more information, visit www.riponhistory.org, facebook.com/riponhistoricalsociety or instagram.com/riponhistoricalsociety/.



THIS 1921 AERIAL photo of Ripon show the type of view that early aviators would have had of the community.

submitted photo



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