

The "Canadian Glider Boosters"

In 1935 an exhibition tour was organized to give demonstrations of gliding covering a great circular route, from Calgary, Alberta, through Lethbridge, Medicine Hat, Moose Jaw, Regina and Winnipeg, over to Prince Albert, across to Edmonton and south to Calgary. The ambitious tour was organized to promote gliding in Canada and the three men called themselves the "Canadian Glider Boosters." The glider owned by the writer was specially fitted up with flying struts for ease of dismantling and assembling and was transported by trailer from exhibition to exhibition. James Fretwell, gliding instructor of the Stettler Gliding Club, combined his efforts with the trio and his fine showmanship was greatly responsible for the huge success attained by the Canadian Glider Boosters on their adventurous tour, a planned route of some 2,500 miles. While the writer organized the chain of exhibitions, Fretwell carefully selected the ground for the flying, if no local airport was available. Particular care was taken by the trio to encourage and promote gliding, and interviews were encouraged. The third member, Paul Pelletier, a French Canadian, although not a pilot, joined the boosters for the novelty and sport of the trip. His good sense of humour and pleasing mannerisms bonded the Boosters together into a strong team. His job was to take up a silver collection to assist in defraying expenses and also to help in the work of assembling or packing, the glider.

These three men, with their own car, glider and plenty of initiative and no capital, set out on May 25th, 1935 from Calgary in a downpour of rain just after midnight on an ambitious goodwill tour that was to show what could really be done with a glider in capable hands.

Members of the Calgary Gliding Club came down to extend their best wishes at the start. The car, owned by Fretwell, was specially fitted up for sleeping accommodation by letting down the front seats, and the glider trailer carried a full kit for repairs. The 145 miles to Lethbridge, our first stop, was covered without incident, except that the rain found its way into the sedan much to Fretwell's discomfort.

The first exhibition before a huge crowd was a grand success. Members of the Lethbridge Gliding Club welcomed us so royally that it was decided to remain there a few days. For the first time in Western Canada, two gliders were flown on exhibition. A coin was tossed to see who could get the "Larence" our glider. I lost the toss to Fretwell, so while he used the long rope, I made a lower flight in the big Lethbridge machine. It was a grand sight to see Fretwell flying about 200 feet higher than myself and I could see him distinctly as he leaned forward in his seat to grin at me as he went overhead. I remembered reading of a remark made by a witty German to his fat friend who with great skill caught a thermal and floated above his friends. His bantering remarks were spoken in a particularly loud voice that carried well, "Only fat floats on top." This incident came back to me as Fretwell waved and probably accounted for my own mirth at the moment.

On the last exhibition in Lethbridge, before a huge crowd of spectators, one remarkable flight made by Fretwell did much to create new enthusiasm. While flying only one hundred feet above the crowd, he was caught in a thermal bubble, caused by the air rising off the hot engines of the many cars below and from the sun's heat radiation off the metalwork. The glider in full view banked overhead, turned down wind, came round and flew with all the grace and beauty of a bird, without losing height. Seasoned bush pilots who had flown in many remote parts of Canada, remarked on the beauty of gliding flight and how much impressed were they with gliding.

This was our first victory. Seasoned pilots, who had often scoffed before, had gliding actually brought home to them. Our fourth exhibition was scheduled for Medicine Hat, my own home town. This fine old western town had for the past twelve years witnessed the development of my six machines. They knew of the many years of my experimenting, and yet I knew this homecoming was not to be without the awakening of a sad accident. My brother Lawrence, one of Canada's best loved musicians, was killed while gliding only two years previously. The townspeople greatly loved him and with the coming of our exhibition naturally felt some resentment. Lawrence and I were greatly attached to one another and to his memory my glider was named. Gradually our exhibitions caught the enthusiasm, particularly of the younger people, and I may say with pride that we left with their best wishes of goodwill.

Pelletier with all his wit and spontaneous humour, found his way into the hearts of all who met him. He made the silver collections with all the grace of a showman, and he has stated that during our flights people have come up to him and given into the collection a second time, saying, "Your show is worth it, here's more with best wishes."

Once on the road again, Fretwell usually driving, Pelletier seated in the centre, and the writer occupying the outside, we reverted back to our crusade, discussing events and possible gliding clubs. One incident a daring exhibition in a very small village, always found pleasant discussion.

Driving up onto the main street of this little western town, we left our glider in full view with posters advertising the time of the exhibition. Townspeople soon gathered. As usual always tired and hungry, we made the shortest possible bee-line to the restaurant. A good meal, a cold brisk wash, often in a clear spring or river, if this presented itself to us, after a hot dusty drive and we were ready to prepare our show.

Fretwell came back with news that a suitable field was not available and that a tow-car could never get sufficient speed to tow the glider into the air. I made a quick survey of the district and found a small field a short distance from the main street. It was a suitable field to land in, but not large enough for auto towing. Returning quickly with a plan, I explained it in confidence to my friends. The townspeople little realizing what was intended cheered in amazement as I was zooming off the main street, past shop windows, above the roof tops and up over the town, Circling overhead with keen eyes on the little field I had chosen for landing and my diminishing height, I was able to keep in full view of the crowd and at the last moment, prepared to land. My field looked dangerously small, but with good luck to help me, I skimmed in, hedge-hopped a cow, scattered chickens and came to rest with only a few feet to spare from the fence at the end of the pasture.

The glider was carried back to the town, borne on the shoulders of willing helpers and Fretwell was soon repeating the flight. We never tire of telling of this unique flight, and the people were shown that gliders could be controlled in flight regardless of wind.

It was our practise to establish a camping site and after dinner, and particularly during the evening, we encouraged the people to visit us, so that we could talk on gliding and help and advise the amateur builder as often was the case.

Under the wamevening aies after sundown, our camp was often a cheerful and pleasant spot. Pelletier with his deep rich French Canadian voice, accompanied by banjo or guitar, was a soothing tonic to our tightened up nerves.

Our day started with washing in the camp, breakfast at the restaurant, filling up with gas and mailing of notices in advance of our exhibitions. One occasion we drove 97 miles to the next exhibition. At times like this, we drove all night and next day to be on schedule. Tired, hungry and travel stained, little time was left for getting the glider rigged and prepared for flying Nerves tightened, and as the strain increased, we found our only relaxation was when flying or lying down at night.

One day we gave two exhibitions, one at noon and the other in the evening at the next village only a few miles away. The school children were all given a holiday to come and see the gliding and it proved a real educational value to students and teacher.

We packed up quickly, raced to the second village and without stopping to eat were flying on schedule the second time that day, before a very appreciative audience. Too tired to pack up, we staked out glider out in the field, left an enthusiastic admirer to guard the glider, staggered into the restaurant, ate pancakes, drank horrible coffee and had mincepie that may at some earlier date have been fresh and tasty. Too tired to complain we returned to our camp and in utter exhaustion slept until sunup.

During the early stages of our tour, we met with our first accident, while on the road. On May 27th just prior to leaving for Taber, the stabilizer of the glider struck a telegraph pole as we were turning the huge trailer around in the street. The fuselage snapped off just in front of the tail surfaces, but with great speed we had it repaired that night. This necessitated breaking our schedule or leaving out one of the towns. We decided to leave out our next call and proceed, passing through the town, but without stopping to give an exhibition.

June 5th saw us at Maple Creek. We planned a big exhibition and made arrangements for an interesting display, but the crowds were poor owing to threatening rain and a very chilly wind. To make matter worse, we were forced to use a particularly rough field with low bushes. Only two flights were made and further attempts abandoned; the glider nearly being wrecked on the last flight when landing in the thick scrub.

Collections were poor and we had little surplus capital. Rainy weather set in and for the first time we had the choice of buying enough gasoline to get us to our next stop or buying food for ourselves, of which we were in great need. Tucking in our belts, we drove on only to be faced by a deluge of rain at Swift Current. Hungry and ill at ease, we sat beside our glider praying for the rain to cease. Great oceans of mud turned into running torrents and soon our landing ground was flooded. However, towards late afternoon the rain stopped and the sun came out in all its glory. We stopped a few cars on the highway to get a crowd together and in a short time a nice gathering lined the highway. It was impossible for a car to tow the glider through all that sea of mud, so our only alternative was to tow from the highway. Telephone lines were on the offside and our take-offs had to be made across wind. The car actually dragged the glider into the air as huge clods of mud dropped off the skid. Without a moment's hesitation Pelletier started collecting and managed to take in the sum of \$2.90. We gave them a good display four flights in all and our landings were near to seaplane landings after the rain. Too hungry and tired were we to pack our machines, so we staked it down in the mud and drove off to the first restaurant where we did justice to a hearty meal.

Better luck followed us; in fact we had our first real narrow escape. While flying at the Moose Jaw airport, Pelletier discovered that Fretwell and I had been flying with a severed rear spar on the starboard wing. We had noticed a crackling noise in the wing but had assumed it to be caused from the fabric slapping against the ribs. Upon inspection, we found the spar cracked clean through and all that prevented the wing from collapsing was the tautness of the fabric and the ribs binding the cracked portion.

Fortunately for us we had decided that this exhibition would be one without our usual stunts of stall turns, steep dives and zooms. A few years previously the club aero engineer had lost both legs in a glider accident and all the officials were sceptical concerning anything with gliders. To leave a good impression and to fulfill our creed as Glider Boosters, we gave an exhibition of gliding, portraying all the beauty of flight that we knew. For this reason and this reason alone do we give credit for surviving these flights without the wings folding up.

Once again we made quick repairs and worked steadily that evening and finished quite late. Having only 42 miles to our next stop at Regina, we decided to drive on that night and in a steady downpour, set off. We were in excellent spirits for the proceeds, nearly \$14.00 gave us a wonderful sense of security. Arriving on the outskirts of Regina in pitch darkness, we found a little stream by the headlights of the car, followed it off the road for a short distance and prepared to camp for the night. Without leaving the car, we let the seats down and in a crowded fashion sank into a deep sleep. The sun was well up when we awakened and with a casual glance through the window, I got the surprise of my life. We had, without our knowledge, made camp in the grounds of the parliament buildings, and surrounding our site were gardens of beautiful flowers and shrubs. Needless to say, we dressed with all possible speed and without further delay, made our way into town for a hearty breakfast.

The officials at the Regina Airport welcomed us with every courtesy and we enjoyed a long talk about their work as a club and our tour of gliding. Two new Chevrolet cars were loaned for towing purposes and with these powerful cars we got away with good starts. My first flight was similar to the soaring flight of Fretwell's made in Lethbridge on thermals and with graceful banks and spirals, flew up and down the field and over the Buildings without loss of height. This flight greatly impressed the club officials and the 1000 or 1500 spectators, our largest audience during the tour. To bring the day to a grand finale the club aeroplanes were brought out and a fine show of stunting gave the crowds an added thrill which I am sure they will all remember for some time to come.

Driving on to Weburn, Sask., we interviewed an old glider enthusiast who advised us to fly in a grand field beside the Mental Asylum. Our exhibition went as usual much to the amazement and enjoyment of our audience, but without realizing it, our audience or rather the greater part, were inmates from the mental home. No sooner had we got into the air than they surged forward, running helter-skelter in every conceivable direction. They left no room for a landing and our only alternative was to land amongst them, trusting to providence that none would be injured. They yelled with delight as some deliberately ran in front of the landing machine.

A big fellow with an alarm clock attached to a stout cord, came grinning up to me after the flight and in his eye, I could see devilment fostering. The fellow had conceived the novel intentions of acquiring my plus fours for a souvenir, and strange as it may seem, I was really only in a state of security when up flying out of his reach.

Further flights were a repetition of the first. When the glider was about to land, we on the ground yelled at the top of our voices and began to race across the field attracting their attention. Our ruse worked perfectly, and as the patients raced after us, yelling and gestulating, a portion of the field was left clear for a safe landing. We succeeded in giving six flights, but found the people so trying and tiring that we escaped the mob and retired early.

One of the most interesting experiences during the tour, was the result of a very interesting phenomena.

Our audience was small and the afternoon was one which bore down hot and sultry with only a faint soft velvety breeze. The first flight proved a failure. The machine seemed hardly able to support itself in the air and after a rather dangerous take-off staggered back to the ground as if the wings were unable to support the glider's weight. I had experienced this condition previously during my gliding in Medicine Hat and from past experience, came to the conclusion that to succeed in making a reasonable flight for our audience, the machine must be lightened of all superfluous weight. Being on the lighter side than Fretwell and after emptying my pockets of all trinkets, and removing all superfluous clothing, I was able to lighten the craft to make a fair take-off and perform a flight much to the satisfaction of the small group of people. The glider had little buoyancy, the turns were executed with great difficulty and my flying partner still scoffed at my precautions of lightening the "Lawrence". However, with his fifteen pounds of excess, he was unable to get up to anything but just off the ground, although I gave the tow car all the speed she had. It was my day however, having the advantage over weight and I performed three flights.

We gave some fine exhibitions at Souris and Brandon. Souris is a beautiful spot of only 1661 population, but is set into a lovely valley of trees, shrubs and flowers, with sharp winding roads. We had never seen such a beautiful spot and our flights over the quarry were made in thermals. Fretwell made a beautiful long glide out over the quarry, losing little height and he was able to soar out away from the field and return, just skimming the ground over the quarry, to a landing by the crown.

At Winnipeg, we gave twenty exhibition flights, but were greatly hampered by bad weather. We stayed a week and during that time our living expenses exceeded our collections. The airport officials were very kind, having loaned us a "Bell" tent and permitted us the use of ablution facilities in the club rooms. During one night, the rain came down in a downpour and we were flooded out. A terrific wind came up and our tent leaking water badly, swayed and strained at the ropes. It was touch and go for us as great gusts of wind threatened to leave us on the outside instead of a partially sheltered inside. Finally we gave up, half soaked and in not a very good frame of mind, and raced in pyjamas across the sea of mud and into the shelter of the club rooms. Here we bunked for two days as the rain fell incessantly. During our first exhibition I gave tight banking turns, 180° spirals, and dives ending in a zoom over the crowd.

Fretwell, on his first flight struck a smooth thermal and in graceful turns, swung easily over the crowd, banked gently and in a long beautiful glide brought the glider to rest right at the feet of the airport officials and pilots. So enthusiastic were they over gliding that two seasoned pilots wished to take the "Lawrence" up and try a little stunting, but we gave them no encouragement. Finally, after a week in Winnipeg, we decided that owing to the city being a large one, and the population quite past the novelty of airplanes and flying, our work was of little interest. This was proved by the fact that only \$12.28 was collected in the seven days of our stay. On the last day we had only sufficient money to buy enough gasoline to take us to Carman, 78 miles south.

We were told that a fair was in progress there, one of the largest in the country and that it was held on a large race-course. We decided to go immediately. After paying our bills we were left with only a cent, so we drove the seventy-eight miles with heavy hearts and empty stomachs. Upon arrival, I immediately got into touch with Dr. Munn, Secretary Treasurer of the Carman Exhibition. I was hungry and desperate and refused to accept defeat with a refusal. However, I managed the great showman to accept a bargain, promising him flying in front of the grandstand, at his own time and without payment, provided he would permit Mr. Pelletier to take a collection from the grandstand. I left, not feeling greatly elated, for I knew I had two hungry men to face and no prospects of making any money till the following evening. Having not eaten for twenty-four hours, and another twenty-four hours of fasting, did not appeal to my flying partner.

Pelletier and I had roughed it before and had experienced pangs of hunger and I had done a four-day fast a few years back. Realizing my friend would be suffering an experience none of us really cherished, I promised to get some money.

The Town Magistrate was interviewed and I explained the whole case to him. He was very sympathetic and his kindness found me outside with a dollar and a half loan. I placed the money in my friend's hand and, needless to say, he treated us all to the best meal we had ever eaten before. It was late when we turned in, to sleep in a sheltered grove of trees behind the grandstand on the exhibition grounds. Next morning while my friends were still asleep, I slipped out to inspect the field. It was only about 900 feet long, surrounded by an infield fence which boarded the race track and the high outside fence of the grounds. A thick grove of trees lay to the south, the grandstand exhibition platform, swinging trapeze, tents and basket-ball nets along the west side and in the field were also two regulation back-stops for the two baseball diamonds. To the north lay telephone lines and the fence, and in the east outside the grounds lay the golf course. The field was dangerous to fly in. The thoughts of attempting to get sufficient height to clear the grandstand and land back in a field strewn with obstacles made shivers run up and down my spine. I studied the situation, planned each detail and finally decided that if the glider failed to obtain sufficient height, a left turn would be necessary to get into the golf-course, or a forced landing on the tree-tops would be the only alternative to crashing into the grandstand and the congested crowd. The wind was blowing extremely strong and promised to remain unabated for the rest of the day. Our take-off which would be across-wind and the vortices promised us a rough and unpleasant take-off which could make the start, under these adverse conditions, a dangerous undertaking.

The take-off was only possible to achieve with the use of block and tackle. By using this method, we could thus obtain a faster tow and quick take-off which was of vital importance for the flight. We were beset with danger on all sides and just before our act we gritted our teeth and awaited the announcement over the loudspeakers for our turn on the programme. Finally it came. Our instructions were to act immediately so as not to cause any lag in the programme, but at the precise moment we had to hold the glider down against the battering wind. Fretwell's face was drawn and worried as I climbed into the seat and I knew I had my job ahead of me. There is very little to say about the flight. It was breathtaking and over in a few seconds. I reached about 300 feet altitude in one mad swoop, banked over the grandstand, raced down-wind, and losing height in the vortices from the buildings, made a hairpin turn around the basket-ball nets, one wing skimming the ground - and landed.

I never heard the cheers, but found time to offer a little prayer of thanksgiving.

Fretwell's take-off was sharp and swift. He seemed to be climbing steadily and should have easily obtained a far greater height than my first flight, but with fear welling up inside me, I saw him cast loose of the tow-line when hardly higher than the grandstand. Horrified, I watched him almost vertically bank over the huge building, graze his wing on the building, level up, race downwind and land with a heavy jolt, the glider coming to rest with the nose of the machine overhanging a four foot drop onto the race track.

This was as much flying as we wished to do and Fretwell and I clasped hands in mutual understanding. All signs of hunger had vanished and we gave little thought to Pelletier who was by this time busy in the grandstand, collecting for our exhibition. His laughing eyes and good humour with ready and witty remarks soon had him staggering with two pockets full of silver, a grand total of forty-one dollars and forty-one cents. We met him some hours afterwards and with a yell of happy pleasure he came staggering and hardly able to walk with his spoils.

We wisely went into the Ford Dealers who had supplied us with a demonstration car and left the bulk of our collection in safe keeping.

Our next stop was the first restaurant in Carmen and during our very happy meal, we hadly had the good grace to acknowledge the courtesy and compliments to our gliding exhibition that afternoon.

The following day we attended an open air church service on the Fairgrounds and immediately after the service, while the crowd was still present, made two flights. The air was still tricky, but our confidence was exceptional and the two flights although all as tricky as those made the day before, were performed without mishap.

The next day, Monday, July 1st, we gave two further exhibition flights at the Fair, which was the final day. These were made under the same dangerous conditions as previously, but we had gained experience from the other flights, so much so, that greater height was reached and a longer flight took place, carrying us well over the trees, back of the grandstand over the ferris wheel and around into the field again.

The crowds had by this time talked of our exhibition and the show people saw a big feature for their performance, if we could join them. We were called to the Manager's office, just before they left for Estevan, and the offer was put to us. We decided to think it over, owing to the tremendous risks, and left word that, if we agreed, would meet them the following day and sign the contracts. The contract was to offer \$150.00 for each show and our feature would be billed twice a week. A regular goldmine to us after what we had gone through the past week. When the show had gone we decided to join them and as the time was late and nightfall had set in, we staked the glider in the field as on previous occasions, yet securely against the wind.

Before turning in to sleep, our log books were put in order by the light of the dash-board lamp, and our record showed 410 flights in which we had flown at twenty-two different towns and cities. The meter on the dash had been carefully recorded from place to place ^{and} up to Carman we had covered 1082 miles on our tour, without accident and almost precisely to schedule. Thousands of Canadian people had witnessed our gliding and we felt our original purpose of encouraging and promoting gliding was being fulfilled. That night we fell asleep completely exhausted, for the strain of flying under these trying conditions was beginning to tell on us. Early in the morning, a low growling sound slightly disturbed our slumber, then with a roar like an express train, sleep was suddenly dashed away.

We were in the centre of a tornado, and sheltered as we were in the grove of trees, our car rocked in the wind and the pelting rain made a deafening sound as it struck the car. Our thoughts flew to the glider staked out in the open and we rushed to the spot in our pyjamas not wasting time to dress. On arriving, splattered with mud, we were horrified to find the glider gone. The tornado had picked it up bodily, carried it for about a hundred feet, where it struck the ground leaving some wreckage. Then it was evidently lifted again only to be rolled into a mass of splinters and torn fabric and finally hurled into a tree, where we found it. There was no recognisable shape. It was a lump mass of useless fabric and not a piece of wood any larger than a broom-handle remained. Our tears mingled with the rain as we slowly turned our backs and returned to the car to dress.

All that was salvaged was placed in a small box. This we loaded onto the trailer and then prepared to say goodbye to a family of friends who had more or less adopted us.

With heavy hearts we said goodbye and made the return trip to Medicine Hat, a distance of over 700 miles, stopping only for gasoline. Stopping at my home, my mother saw that all travel stains were cleared away. Hot baths and a wonderful home cooked supper put us into a better mood. That night we laid our plans and it was decided to return to Calgary, reorganize the Calgary Gliding Club which was now without a machine, and give assistance to any clubs that may be forming in Alberta owing to the impetus given to gliding by our exhibitions.

We returned to Calgary quietly without a lot of press ballyhoo, and were sincerely proud to be the glider barnstormers and the goodwill troupe of sponsors to the sport of gliding.

TOWN	Population	Miles	Arrival	Leave	No. Flights	Collection \$
Calgary	83,761	-	-	12.15 AM May 25, 1935	140	25.00
Lethbridge	13,489	145	May 26	May 27	56	22.53
Bow Island	314	71	" 27	" 27	8	2.10
Medicine Hat	10,300	40	" 27	June 4	67	9.47
Irvine	234	21	June 4	" 5	6	3.40
Maple Creek	1,154	39	" 5	" 6	2	.35
Swift Current	5,296	97	" 6	" 7	4	2.90
Herbert	1,009	32	" 7	" 7	8	4.70
Moose Jaw	21,299	88	" 8	" 10	24	13.96
Regina	53,209	42	" 11	" 12	13	17.47
Milestones	404	31	" 12	" 13	3	3.07
Weyburn	5,002	38	" 13	" 14	6	8.75
Estevan	2,936	54	" 14	" 15	5	6.77
Alameda	300	42	" 15	" 17	10	8.01
Carlyle	480	28	" 17	" 18	5	5.70
Redvers	-	-	" 18	" 18	5	3.15
Pipestone	-	65	" 18	" 18	6	2.50
Virden	1,590	25	" 19	" 20	3	7.30
Souris	1,661	36	" 20	" 21	7	4.70
Brandon	17,082	-	" 21	" 22	6	8.95
Portage la Prairie	6,597	55	-	-	-	-
Winnipeg	218,785	55	" 22	" 28	20	12.28
Carman	1,418	78	" 28	July 3	6	41.41
TOTAL		1,082			410	214.47