



Submitted photo

From 1927-1930, the Bird-Wing Commercial Aircraft Co. manufactured biplanes in St. Joseph.

Airplane company once made its home at Rosecrans, enjoyed brief popularity

By ALONZO WESTON
alonzow@npgco.com
St. Joseph News-Press

St. Joseph once had an airplane manufacturing plant. From 1927 to 1930 Bird-Wing Commercial Aircraft Co. manufactured both liquid and radial air-cooled small biplanes.

"They weren't for military use or anything. They were just for joy riding," said Chester Batsell, longtime St. Joseph resident.

Aviation was the rage around the country in the 1920s. Flying was relatively new, Charles Lindbergh had made his trans-Atlantic flight and several small-time pilots were barnstorming the small towns and rural regions giving stunt flying and racing exhibitions.

Rosecrans Field, located in the Waterworks Road area at

the time, was a hotbed of activity. Aircraft manufacturers sprang up like weeds around the country after World War I. Several aircraft plants were built in and around Kansas City as well as other areas of the Midwest.

"They had high expectations for aviation here," said Don Bonner, longtime St. Joseph resident and amateur pilot. "It was when everyone thought aviation was the wave of the future and anything connected with it was highly regarded."

According to Mr. Bonner, Bird-Wing Commercial Aircraft Co. was started as a venture of Carl Wolfley and a few other local businessmen and aviation enthusiasts.



They had a large structure built in the northeast portion of Rosecrans Field, which housed the hangar, shop and offices for the business. It also had a flying school.

The first planes the company built were two liquid-cooled biplanes. They each had a wingspan of 31 feet, 4 inches, and room for passengers. Two people could sit in the front cockpit while the pilot sat in the rear seat.

"At the time that was about all the type of planes we had," said Mr. Batsell while adding that his family also had something to do with the construction of the Bird-Wing planes.

"The wing sections were made by my father and uncle

at the Batsell and Sons Millwork Co.," he said. "I think they were made out of balsa wood and covered with a silk-like fabric and coated with some sort of lacquer. The body of the plane was orange and the wings were white or off-white with a bird insignia."

Mr. Batsell also remembered spending a lot of Sunday afternoons with his family at Bird-Wing as a child.

His family enjoyed taking sightseeing flights around the area in the small plane. Rides of three or five minutes usually cost \$4 a head and \$10 for two people but Mr. Batsell often got to ride free.

"(The pilots) would usually take two passengers but if only one went, I got to go," he said. "I only got to go

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Airplane company once called Rosecrans its home

Continued from Page B1

eight to 10 times but for a 9-year-old kid it was something. It was an interesting time for me and my family."

It its short life, Bird-Wing was extremely popular. Many well-known aviators from around the country came to fly the planes.

A few months after he made his famous solo, trans-Atlantic flight, Charles Lindbergh stopped off in St. Joseph as part of his national tour and flew one of the Bird-Wing airplanes.

Bird-Wing made just two more planes before the company folded in 1930.

"A third plane was built and operated only a few weeks before it caught on fire," said

Mr. Bonner. A fourth plane, one that featured a new air-cooled radial engine, was built after that one, which proved to be successful.

But the timing wasn't right for the company itself to be successful. By 1930 the country was in the beginning of the Depression and Bird-Wing, like many other businesses, closed.

The crash of the stock market, not any of its airplanes, is what ruined the company," said Mr. Bonner.

Tales of the Midland Empire is published weekly. If you know an unusual story, unusual bits of history or an unusual person in the area, call Alonzo Weston at 271-8574 (800) 779-6397 or e-mail him at alonzow@npgco.com.

Lindbergh's visit to city in 1927 drew c

1-18-01

By ALONZO WESTON
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St. Joseph News-Press

Famed aviator Charles Lindbergh made a tour of 82 cities right after his historic trans-Atlantic solo flight in 1927. St. Joseph was fortunate enough to be one of the cities he visited.

It was on August 19, 1927, that Mr. Lindbergh visited what was then Rosecrans Airfield. It was three months after the man known as the "American Columbus of the Air" had made history as the first man to make a solo flight across the Atlantic, from New York to Paris.

"Rosecrans was about where the (St. Jo Frontier) Casino is today," said Gary Chilcote, curator of the Patee House

Museum. There is a special display inside the museum about Lindbergh's visit here.

"In those days it was something to see. It was like bringing in an astronaut that had been to the moon," Mr. Chilcote added. "Today of course they fly to Paris every day but at that time nobody had ever done a non-stop solo flight."

Mr. Lindbergh arrived 30 minutes earlier than scheduled that day at the old Rosecrans Airfield, which at that time was located at the foot of Chestnut Street near the banks of the Missouri River.

A crowd of about 20,000 people, according to *St. Joseph Gazette* estimates, had already formed along the banks of the Missouri River. They parked their cars anywhere they could in nearby fields and

pastures and all a Others sought top of Wyeth Hill The KFEQ radio remote broadcast more who couldn't hear the event.

Walt Drannan at the time. But h ly the commotion caused in his nor ond Street neigh

"I remember ev borhood was exci St. Joseph native, down to the airpo walked down the

Mr. Lindbergh c than an hour. But



Submitted photo

Famed aviator Charles Lindbergh, second from right, poses next to his 'Spirit of St. Louis' plane with a few Missouri military officers during his visit to Rosecrans Air-

field in 1927. From left to right are Col. John McNeely, Col. William E. Stringfellow, Mr. Lindbergh and Col. Joseph A. Corby.

Lindbergh's visit drew crowd of 20,000

Continued from Page B1

Before he left, Mayor Louis Stigall and Chamber of Commerce manager L.B. Clough presented him with a small model of the "Spirit of St. Louis." It was carved from wood taken from the Pony Express Stables.

When it was time to leave, Mr. Lindbergh entered his plane, opened a side window and waved to the St. Joseph crowd as he took off for another city.

"It was really significant," said Mr. Chilcote.

Unfortunately Charles Lindbergh would make headlines again in 1934 for the kidnap and murder of his son. To make matters worse, he was labeled a German sympathizer in 1939 after he made a statement that American aircraft was inferior to those built in Germany.

Several years later, with his body wracked with cancer, Charles Lindbergh flew his last

flight. It was from New York to Maui, Hawaii, this time. And it was to spend his last days in his favorite place in the whole world with his family. He died there on August 26, 1974.

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Airport visits revive memories of WWII

Fred Wilson helped switch field to military

9-2-99

By ALONZO WESTON

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St. Joseph News-Press

Fred Wilson goes to Rosecrans Memorial Airport pretty regularly. He often goes there for ceremonies and air shows and sometimes just to watch the airplanes.

Like anybody else, he sees the huge airplanes landing and taking off on the asphalt runways and all the many buildings on the base.

But only he and maybe a few others can close their eyes and see Rosecrans Field the way it was before World War II. Before it became an Army base. Before it was even really Rosecrans Field.

You ask Mr. Wilson and he'll tell you what it was like when he arrived here more than 50 years ago as one of the first servicemen that helped get the military air base started at Rosecrans Field.

"All it had was a little hangar," he said. "It was just one great big field with a small hangar in the middle and a very small runway."

When the first Rosecrans Field was built in 1922 at Lake Contrary in St. Joseph, it was the nation's first municipally owned and lighted



Fred Wilson, left, Leo Hill and Dominic Rea prepare to take a truckload of supplies from the old Rosecrans Airport to another air base in Ohio. The photo was taken in 1942, not long after the Army Air Corps began using the once city-owned airfield.

Photo courtesy of Leo Hill

airports. Named after Sgt. Guy Rosecrans, the city's only aviator killed in WWI, many famous flyers such as Will Rogers, Charles Lindbergh, Arthur Goebel, Wiley Post and many other famous aviators of the times have visited it.

Rosecrans Field has had three locations in its relatively short history.

A few years after it was built in south St. Joseph, it moved closer to the Missouri River Bluffs on Waterworks Road. In February 1935, the Waterworks Road airport closed, and on November 28, 1937, the ribbon was cut in a dedication ceremony on the ground where it stands today.

On July 1, 1942, the popular city-owned airfield was turned over to military control.

According to a *News-Press Gazette* article dated July 4, 1945, it was initially Majors Curtis A. Keen and Roy B. Flippin from Bolling Field in Washington, D.C.,

who arrived on base first on July 6, 1942. It was six days later when Mr. Wilson, then Sgt. Fred Wilson from Detroit, and Sgt. Virgil Presnell from Texas reported at the base in Missouri.

"(Sgt. Presnell) and I came from Bolling Field in Washington, D.C.," Mr. Wilson said.

"Major Flippin saw me walking past his window one day and said 'I want you to pick another guy and drive my car to Rosecrans Field in St. Joseph, Mo.' He wanted his car here because his wife was coming here. He didn't say anything about the field not being built yet."

The two men stayed at Camp Pe-tree, a Civilian Conservation Corps barracks and outpost on Waterworks Road to make ready for the first group of flight students and other Air Corps personnel.

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Airport visits revive memories

Continued from Page B1

"The outfit we worked in was air transport command," Mr. Wilson said. "Our job was to ferry supplies, troops and personnel wherever they had to go."

Leo Hill, who now resides in Kansas City, was in the first bunch of Air Corps personnel to arrive at Camp Petree.

"We were up at Camp Petree. I don't know how long until we got barracks bought in," Mr. Hill said. "We had to pitch tents out by the old hangar, which was the only hangar out there at that time."

It wasn't long before Rosecrans came up to speed and functioning as a training field for the Air Transport Command Unit of the Army Air Corps. Mr. Wilson, Mr. Hill, Mr. Presnell and an-

other Air Corpsman, Lloyd Colbert worked in the Army motor pool at Rosecrans Field for a time.

"We all became close friends and three of us married local girls," Mr. Wilson said.

Today, Mr. Hill and Mr. Wilson and their wives still visit regularly. Only Mr. Wilson goes to the air base.

"I haven't been out to the air base since I left," Mr. Hill said.

"Fred goes out there a lot but I have never been back out there."

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First airplane landed here on golf course

Attracted by an unfamiliar humming from the skies, St. Joseph people came out of houses and stores and craned their necks to witness the daring young man in his flying machine, as he looped the loop and dipped the dips.

The pilot was St. Joseph native, Hayden Campbell, who two hours earlier had landed the first plane in St. Joseph at the Country Club golf course. It was 1917, and he was on leave from the Army and here to visit his mother.

"I remember flying with him when I was in my teens. It was a lot of fun," said his nephew, Stuart Campbell of St. Joseph.

Hayden Campbell first received flight training in the Army and then went on to be an instructor. He was on the ship going overseas on Armistice Day and therefore did not see action.

His love of flying and planes continued and in the '30s he and a British airplane designer, Walter Barling, who designed the largest World War I bomber, designed a six-passenger freight plane.

It was designed to fill the gap between the larger, many-passenger airplanes that flew great distances. It was planned for small fields and small towns.

"The venture was a complete and utter failure," said Stuart Campbell. "But that was due mostly to the Depression. You couldn't get the financial backing needed for such a scheme."

Undaunted, in 1935 Campbell went on to design his own plane, dubbed the "Flying Egg" by the news media. It was a new concept plane designed for affordability.



Here is the fated "Flying Egg" designed by Hayden Campbell in 1935.

The "Flying Egg" sported a converted V8 engine, a tri-cycle landing gear and twin tail fins with a propeller between them. It was hoped the plane could be manufactured for commercial use.

Stuart Campbell did the drawings for some of the plane's parts and went on, influenced by his uncle, to work for Lockheed.

"Coincidentally, I was in Bombay, India, in 1935, watching a newsreel about the United States, when it was broadcast that my uncle had designed his own plane," said Campbell.

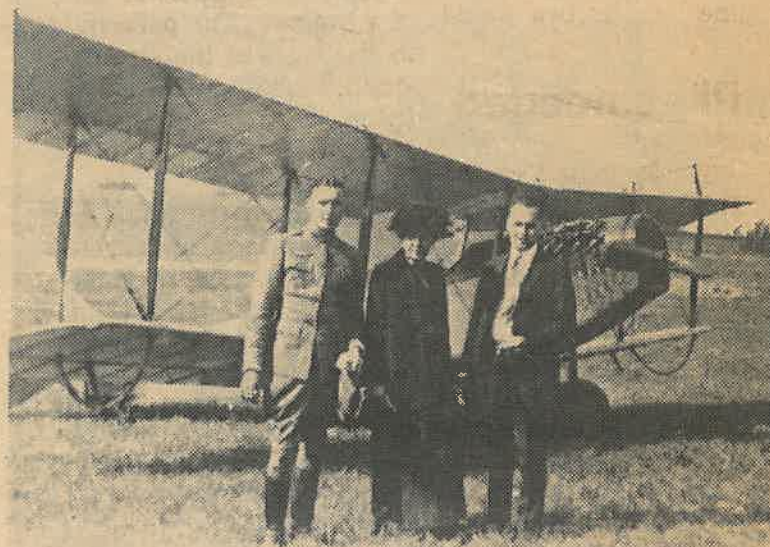
The plane was manufactured where Wire Rope in St. Joseph is now and was kept in a hangar on Waterworks Road, the home of the first airfield here.

However, again the enterprise was not to be profitable. The first problem was financial backing; the second was the wreck of the plane while on a test flight for the government's Department of Commerce. During a speed run, the oil line broke.

Both men suffered injuries but nobody was killed.

During World War II,

Campbell worked for years, and during semi-retirement, he was a consultant on the design team for the DC-9 aircraft.



Here stands aviator Hayden Campbell with his parents, Dr. and Mrs. Forrest Campbell, on his visit to St. Joseph in an Army training plane in 1917.

Daring flyer came here in 1909

AFTER THE RECENT RED-EDICATION of Rosecrans Memorial Airport — which survived the Flood of '93 — a caller asked when the first airplane flight took place in St. Joseph.

By coincidence, in cleaning out a walk-in attic, we came up with the answer: Dec. 14, 1909 — 85 years ago — at Lake Contrary. The daring young pilot was Charles K. Hamilton, who shipped his pusher biplane with a wing span of 26 feet. The craft was powered by a 25 horsepower Curtiss engine and pneumatic

rubber-tired landing wheels. The entire plane weighed only 85 pounds, including the bamboo-ribbed wings that were covered with rubberized silk.

After the plane was assembled and made three short test flights, Hamilton made "official" flights on Dec. 14, 15 and 16. On the first day, 3,000 people braved the snow to see Hamilton, facing a 30-mph gale, fly around the oval race track at the lake, never more than 10 feet above the ground. He also made two flights that day over Lake Contrary.

THE SECOND DAY saw three unsuccessful flights, with the craft rising only about three or four feet and remaining aloft only a few seconds. A crowd of 1,500 saw the plane, in one attempt, smash into a fence at the south-



TIMELY OBSERVATIONS

By FREDERICK SLATER

NP 4-22-94
east end of the race track but the craft sustained only minor damage.

According to the *News-Press*, the third day was the most exciting. As a "tremendous" crowd watched, the plane rose 25 feet into the air, skimmed across the icy lake and at a point near the Lotus Club was caught by a gust of wind which almost flipped the craft. Recovering stability satisfactorily, Hamilton headed south at a speed of 75 mph, aided by a strong north wind.

There were two more flights that day. The final flight ended when the plane struck a wire fence and dragged the pilot, who was entangled in control wires,

over the icy lake. After freeing himself from the wires, the pilot ran after the pilotless plane, stopping it before it could hit another fence.

SOME HISTORICAL ASPECTS OF THE FLIGHT:

✓ This was apparently the first flight of a heavier-than-air machine west of the Mississippi River.

✓ This was evidently the first flight an airplane made in a snow-storm.

✓ The plane was the one which had won the Gordon Bennett Aviation Race Cup at Rheims, France, earlier in the year.

✓ All the flights were made from the frozen ice of Lake Contrary.

Hamilton, who brought along his own mechanic, Albert Dody, to help assemble the plane, was paid \$2,000 by a group of St. Joseph downtown merchants for his flying demonstration in St. Joseph. He next went to Overland Park, Kan — shipping the craft by railroad, because there was too much open water between here and Kansas City — where the plane was reassembled and made another demonstration of manned flight.

What happened to Hamilton?

You probably guessed right. He was killed in a plane crash on the West Coast while demonstrating his airplane.

Daring young man flew plane here in 1909

WHILE A NUMBER of persons had made balloon ascensions in St. Joseph before the turn of the century, St. Joseph residents did not see a heavier-than-air craft fly until 1909. When those flights did take place, on Dec. 14, 15 and 16, it marked the first ascent of a heavier-than-air flying machine west of the Mississippi River.

Pilot of the first aeroplane to be seen in the skies at St. Joseph was Charles K. Hamilton, a member of the newly organized Curtiss Exhibition Team. The plane was the biplane Glenn Hammond Curtiss had flown to win the Gordon Bennett cup at Rheims, France, earlier in 1909.

The plane was a pusher biplane with a wing span of 26 feet. The engine, built by Curtiss, was to the rear of the pilot's seat. The entire plane, which weighed 85 pounds, had wings with bamboo ribs and fabric covering of rubberized silk. The landing gear consisted of small inflated tires on wheels somewhat smaller than bicycle wheels.

THE DARING YOUNG AVIATOR and his flying machine flew from the frozen surface of Lake Contrary. Credit for bringing Hamilton and his craft to St. Joseph went to the St. Joseph Retail Merchants Association, who paid \$2,000 for the exhibition. Hamilton, the plane and Albert Dody, the mechanic, arrived Dec. 8, 1890, and used a temporary hangar at Lake Contrary where they assembled the plane.

Incidentally, the four-cylinder Curtiss engine, rated at 25 horsepower, was the most powerful in existence at that time for its weight. The steering apparatus was a small

AP 1-13-91 Timely
observations

Frederick W. Slater
Editorial page editor



box kite-like structure, mounted 10 feet in front of the pilot, and made the craft rise or fall.

In order to keep the plane on an even keel, the pilot shifted his seat from side to side.

SEVERAL TRIAL FLIGHTS had been made before the official first day of flight. On Friday, Hamilton had flown the craft about 10 feet for a short distance. On Sunday, Hamilton flew the wobbling craft in a snowstorm at an elevation of 50 feet, flying some five miles around Lake Contrary.

On Monday, Dec. 14, Hamilton made three flights. The first was within the quarter stretch of the lake's race track as the pilot bucked a 30-mile wind. Two flights, each of about one and one-half minute duration, were then made from the frozen surface of the lake; the plane was never more than 10 feet above the ground.

An estimated 3,000 persons were on hand, despite the icy-cold weather, to watch the flights.

ON THE SECOND DAY, the flights were only partly successful as the plane never rose higher than three or four feet from the ground and remained in the air only a matter

of seconds. The second flight was likewise made from the race track but ended when the plane crashed into a fence.

The *News-Press* recorded the third day's flight. The story said a tremendous crowd was on hand and every available shelter against the icy-cold wind was made use of by those at the lake. Taking off in the late afternoon, the plane headed northwest toward the Casino and rose to about 25 feet, skimming across the ice to a point near the Lotus Club. Banking westward, the plane was caught in a gust of wind, almost turned over, and then headed back down the lake to the Casino.

The ship reached speeds estimated at 75 miles an hour as it was whisked along by the wind. Two more successful flights were made that day but only some 75 persons saw those flights. On the final flight, the aircraft struck a wire fence, dumping the pilot, Hamilton. He, however, pursued the plane and stopped it just before it ran into another wire fence.

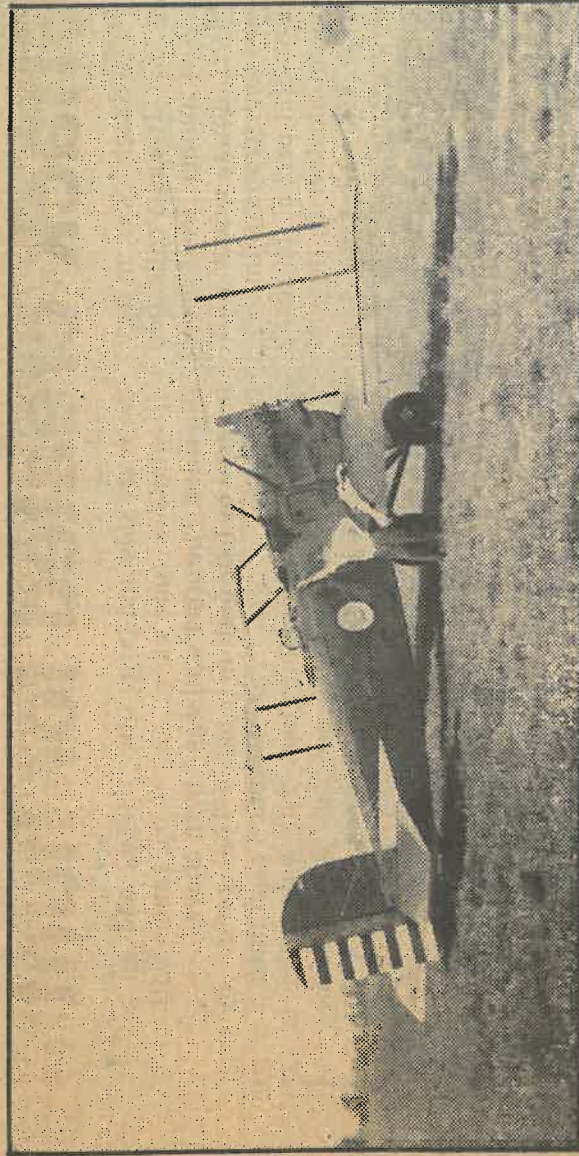
THOUGH UNSHAKEN by the spill, the pilot did drop plans to fly to Kansas City for an exhibition, instead making that trip by train.

What happened to the pilot?

He was killed during a demonstration flight on the West Coast a few years later.

But his flight here did give several thousand St. Joseph and area residents the opportunity to see the first heavier-than-air flying machine make the first flight in history of an aeroplane west of the Mississippi River.

TODAY — how many people even look up when an airplane passes over St. Joseph?



Early flying machine

This is an early Army plane photographed in 1927 at the original Rose-crans Field located in the French Bot-

toms at the foot of Chestnut Street in St. Joseph. Picture submitted by Mattie Hughes, 6039 Meade.

Plane crash stops lessons

At the age of 18 my brother Francis decided he wanted to become an airplane pilot. Flying lessons were \$5 each. He was working at a filling station to earn spending money and fully expected Dad to explode in a fit of anger at such a proposition, as it was a wild idea in 1934.

Although Dad didn't particularly like the idea, he only said, "It's your money and your life, so if you want to get yourself killed taking flying lessons, go ahead."

One evening a few days later, Francis came home elated with an announcement that his first flying lesson was to be the following Saturday. His instructor was Col. Inman, a former World War I Army pilot, who owned a Piper Cub training monoplane.

These lessons continued through the summer and the evening Francis made his first solo flight, we all went

to Hutchinson, Kan., to witness the big event.

He first went up with the instructor, then made a 15-minute solo flight without incident. I think we were all as proud as he was.

A few weeks later the flying lessons came to an abrupt end when the little plane crashed less than a half mile from our small town.

Our entire family saw the plane crash and all of us stood in awe and terror as it happened. It landed swinging cradle fashion by the wings which had caught on two trees on Cemetery Road across a wheat field west of our place.

Before we had crossed the road, both men climbed down one of the trees and were pretty badly shaken. Aside from a few cuts, scratches and bruises, neither man was injured.

Annabelle Volja

Lake Contrary early landing strip

The first commercial flight from St. Joseph took off from the race track at Lake Contrary in 1925 or '26.

It carried two passengers, Al Schaeffer, who managed a news agency and James Reardon, who operated a cigar store on South Seventh Street. They flew to Chicago, but we are not certain how long it took them to reach their destination.

One of the first big air events held here was the National Balloon Race, also held at the race track, in 1925. King Hill was crowded with spectators viewing this great event.

The first real St. Joseph plane was owned by Ed Tracy, who also owned the Western League baseball team here. This was in 1919. He took passengers on short flights that never soared more than 40 to 50 feet for the price of \$3.

There was also an airplane factory here shortly after World War I. It was the property of Hayden Campbell.

It was the late 1920s that the original Rosecrans Field was established in French Bottoms at the foot of Chestnut Street. It was named in honor of Guy Rosecrans, who was killed on Oct. 16, 1918. He died when he accidentally walked into a propeller.

The largest crowd to ever appear there was on Aug. 19, 1927, when Col. Charles Lindbergh made a short visit. He flew into St. Joseph aboard his "Spirit of St. Louis," just three months after setting a new world record for his solo flight to Paris.

It was May 1940 that the present location of Rosecrans Field was ready for dedication with an air show.

During World War II, it

was a transport base and a beehive of industry. Men were stationed here from all across the country and flew planes from here to every part of the Allied World. Operations never ceased; they worked 24 hours every day.

The airport grew to 814 acres and St. Joseph residents were not allowed to visit, but they daily observed such planes as B-25s, Flying Fortresses, B-17s, Liberators and B-24s.

As quickly as it all started, activity ceased as the Army pulled out almost overnight leaving the city with an airport and surplus equipment it could not afford to maintain.

But in 1947 the Missouri Air National Guard was instituted at the airport and today provides a major part of the flying at the field, as well as income the city needs to maintain it.

Comet sighted

I remember well seeing the comet in 1910. I am not sure, I believe it was April 18. Just a week before my ninth birthday.

There was much talk and excitement about the coming event of the comet. Talk such as the world coming to an end and great fires being set by the tail of the comet.

Mother said that was all nonsense but she was anxious for my sister and me to see it. She watched the papers telling exactly when it would appear.

She woke us at 4 a.m. and we went outside and there in the southeastern sky was a bright light about the size of a small moon with a light like the tail of a kite trailing behind. We watched it for quite sometime.

Leah Ward

Comet said to bring doom

Halley's comet. Yes, I certainly do remember that frightening thing that appeared on the western horizon just as night fell. A fiery ball with a long, wide tail.

We lived near the old Lebanon Baptist Church south of Stewartsville, Mo., where a protracted meeting, as they were called, was in progress. Our family, along with neighbors for miles around, attended faithfully.

The minister who was the speaker for the services preached fire, brimstone and doom for all who were not ready for the end of the world that would come at any moment — maybe that very night for he was sure that when the tail of the comet touched the Earth, it would be so hot everything and everybody would be consumed by fire.

forth across the front of the church waving his arms and shouting, "The end is near. It must be soon. This frightening thing in the west is a sign from God that he will wipe everything out of existence. So beware! Get ready!"

As a little girl, how could I get ready for such a terrible thing? By the time we got home I was so scared I would hurry to bed, pull the covers over my head and lie trembling, waiting for the end of the world.

Now I am 84 years old, a great-grandmother, and scientists tell us of another comet that will appear soon. But so far as I know, no one has predicted it will bring the end of the world.

Not-so sketchy memories

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N-P 11-6-98

D

oes the name Gaius G. Little ring a bell?

It might if you lived in St. Joseph 55 or so years ago when Rosecrans Airport was the home of the U.S. Army Transport Command, a training base to give pilots multi-engine experience.

At that time, Mr. Little, a private who had just completed aircraft engine school at Biloxi, Miss., was assigned to Rosecrans. Because the air base, formerly the city's municipal field, was still under expansion construction, personnel were housed at the former Depression-era Federal Transient Camp, which had been re-christened Camp Petree. That camp was on the east side of Waterworks Road in the Missouri River Bluffs.

In recent years, the area has been a site for target shooting. A rock building, from prior rock quarry days, still stands mid-bluff.

Mr. Little, now a retired postmaster, was cleaning out some boxes recently at his home in Stockton, Calif., when he ran across some yellowed *St. Joseph News-Press* clippings and sent them to this newspaper. One was a sketch of the airport as it would look when completed in late 1942.

"Our initial barracks," he recalls, "was Camp Petree, and the field was Rosecrans. With no real experience and still a buck private, I served in several capacities, mostly kitchen police. But I did have some free time, and I spent some of it sketching the officers' quarters, an old wooden barber's chair and

TIMELY OBSERVATIONS EMERITUS



Fred Slater

... families
...invited us
into their
homes ...

pictures of other GIs.

"Someone must have told Col. Curtis A. Keen, the training center's commanding officer, about me, and he asked me if I could draw a picture of the field, showing what it would look like when all the buildings were completed... as seen from the air. So I made the drawing, completing it at 5 that afternoon.

"Colonel Keen, after seeing the drawing, asked if I'd ever been up in a plane, and when I said, 'No,' he told me to check out a flying jacket and boots the next morning, and we'd go for a ride. So, next morning, up we went in a twin-engine AT-9, and about a mile up, he turned the controls over to me for a few minutes. What a thrill!

"Because of that first flight, I applied to join a flying crew as engineer and, on being accepted, made flights in B-25s and C-47s to North Africa and India and was finally sent as part of a C-46 crew to India, where we flew the Hump to China. A year later, Dec. 4, 1944, I was permanently based in China, until, having accumulated enough points when World War II ended, I was sent home."

Mr. Little concluded, "On behalf of all the military based at Rosecrans Field during World War II, I'd like to say 'thank you' to the many, many St. Joseph families who invited us into their homes for dinner and to various events, making us feel at home. Thanks again."

Also sent by the Californian was a copy of a "Top O' The Morning" column from the *St. Joseph Gazette*. The column describes Little, who was cartoonist for the *Camp Petree Rosecrans Flyer*, the base newspaper, as "a dark-haired lad with a big smile," who in civilian life had sketched and retouched photographs. The column said the private had, among his sketches, renderings of the rear of The White House at night, a ferryboat at New Orleans, Florida scenes and reminders of what would become memories of his wartime service.

I reached Mr. Little by phone at his home and learned he retired from the U.S. Postal Service 18 years ago. He and his wife, Dorothy, who were married in Biloxi, recalled living in St. Joseph at the Charleston Apartments — which were destroyed by fire several years ago — on Robidoux Street between Sixth and Seventh streets during his duty at Rosecrans Field. He also had worked part time here for the Bray Photographic Studio.

The Littles live at 312 Paragon Ave., Stockton, CA 95210.

By the way, Mr. Little still sketches regularly.

Fred Slater's column runs on Fridays.

Camp Petree busy before, after war

2-1-01

Buildings long gone from river bluffs site

By ALONZO WESTON
alonzow@hpgco.com
St. Joseph News-Press

For roughly four years, between 1941 and 1945, high up on the river bluffs above Water Works Road sat a military camp named Camp Petree.

Many servicemen from all parts of the country called it home before and during World War II.

Fred Wilson remembers Camp Petree from when he came here from Washington, D.C., in 1941.

"I came to Rosecrans Field in 1941," he said. "Camp Petree was this old Civilian Conservation Corps camp that wasn't being used. It was just vacant buildings."

But the buildings were soon to be used to house Air Force and

Tales of the MIDLAND EMPIRE



Army personnel while new barracks were being built at the new Rosecrans Airfield. When Rosecrans Airfield was first built in 1922 it sat near the Lake Contrary area in South St. Joseph and was municipally owned. It was moved closer to the Missouri River Bluffs near Water Works Road before it was moved to its present site in 1937. It was in July of 1942 when Rosecrans was turned over to military control and the airport became a training field for the

Army Air Corps.

Harvey Beck came to Camp Petree in 1942 as a raw recruit from Biloxi, Miss. He became a military policeman here. But the New York native remembers the camp was a mess when he first came.

"It was up in an old Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) Camp and it was old, dilapidated and unkempt," he said. "It was to be the 406 Headquarters for enlisted men. All of the officers stayed at the Hotel Robidoux."

Fred Slater, retired *News-Press* editor, remembered Camp Petree before it came to be called that.

"It was formerly a transient camp for men who were traveling around the country. It was just an old rock quarry that was used as a barracks and named after Weeden A. Petree," he said.

Weeden A. Petree Jr., was an Army lieutenant and the first

It was just an old rock quarry that was used as a barracks and named after Weeden A. Petree.

— Fred Slater, on how Camp Petree got its name

Buchanan County resident to be killed in World War II. He was killed in 1941 when his airplane was shot down over the Bataan Peninsula.

"Originally it was just a stone building that contained several rooms that the CCC built," Mr. Beck said. "In addition to that there was a small building that served as a mess hall."

Mr. Beck stayed at Camp Petree for two years before being called to overseas duty. His most vivid memory of Camp

Please see *Camp/Page B4*

ces

Biggerstaff, 73, Mo., 10 a.m. today, Church, Wheeling, ing Cemetery. today at Lind-

member of the
of the
and at
university
resided in New
Orleans.



Mrs. McCamy

Bessie L. (Alkire) Neil, 89, Kansas City, Mo. today, Spokane, Wash., formerly of Savannah, Mo., 1 p.m. today, Hawkins Funeral Home, Savannah. Burial: Barnard, Mo., Masonic Cemetery. Family visitation: one hour before the service funeral home.

(Bradley) O'Roark, 60,

Braymer, Mo., 1 p.m. today, Enon Baptist Church, Dawn, Mo. Burial: 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. today at the Lindley Funeral Home, Braymer. There is no scheduled family visitation.

Shirley (Schmechel) Swensen, 70, St. Joseph, memorial service: 7 p.m. today, Brookdale Presbyterian Church, St. Joseph. The body has been cremated. Arrangements by Meierhoffer Funeral Service, St. Joseph.

Wendell E. Hubbard
Wendell E. Hubbard, 90, St. Joseph, died Wednesday, Jan. 31, 2001, at his residence. Arrangements are pending at Meierhoffer Family Funeral Service, St. Joseph.

Robert L.P. Wilkinson
Robert Lee Park Wilkinson, 76, St. Joseph, died Wednesday, Jan. 31, 2001, at a St. Joseph health-care center. Arrangements are pending at Meierhoffer Family Funeral Service, St. Joseph.

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Camp Petree was busy place before, after World War II

Continued from Page B1

Petree was when actor Robert Young made an impromptu visit there once.

"They sent me and another MP down to the train station to pick him up. We were supposed to take him to the officers' club at Rosecrans Field but instead we brought him up to Camp Petree and made him run the obstacle course," he said. "We caught hell for it."

When the airport was completed, Camp Petree was no more. The buildings were destroyed and all that is left

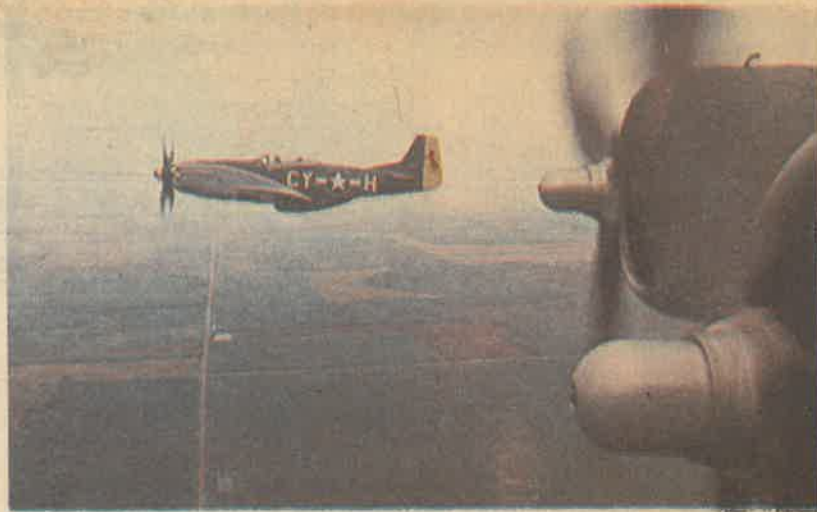
today is an old flag post and parts of a wall.

In 1975, a reunion was held in St. Joseph for all the members of the Army Air Force Transport Command Ferry Division that stayed at Camp Petree.

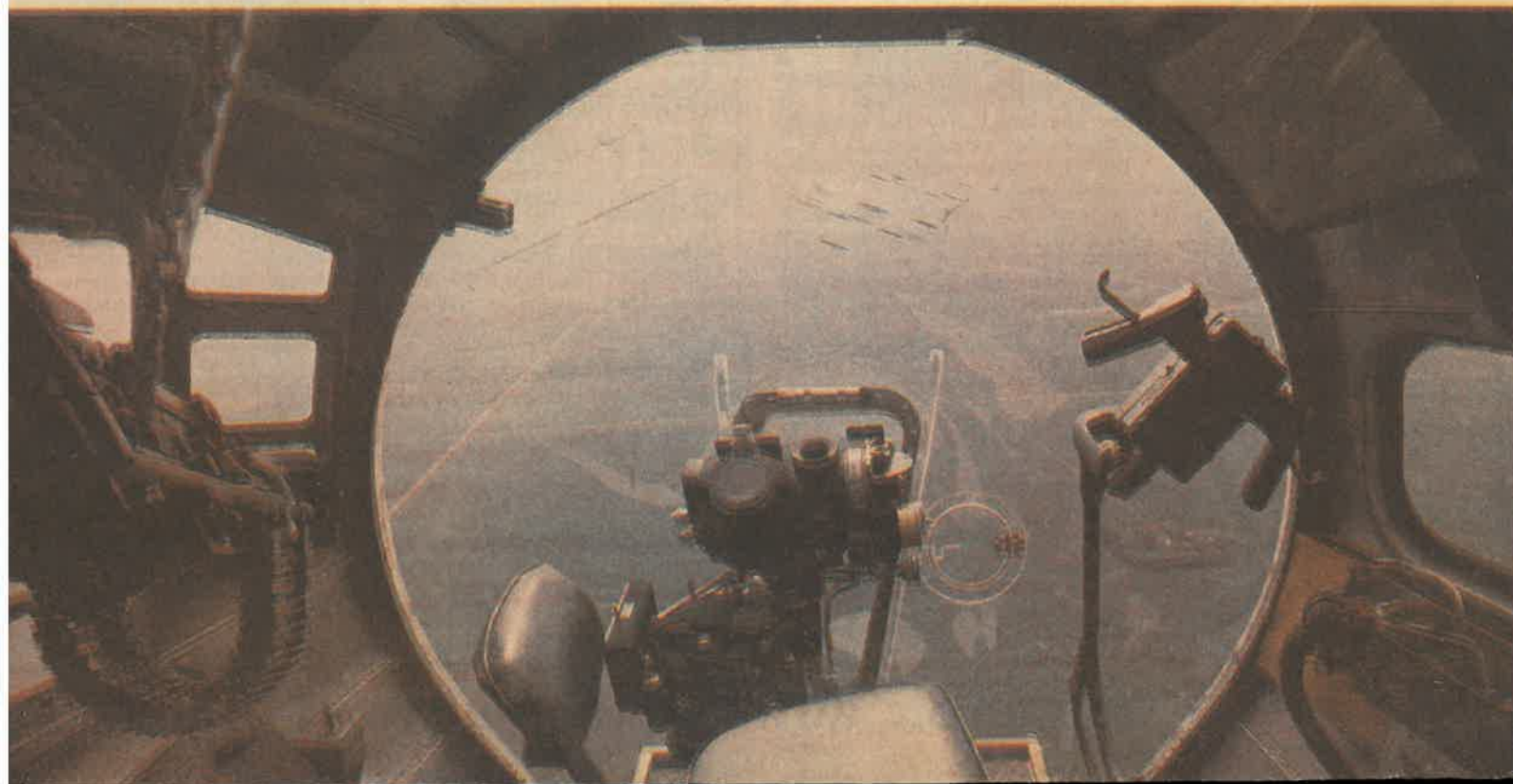
"More than 500 of them came back," said Mr. Beck.

Tales of the Midland Empire is published weekly. If you know an unusual story, unusual bits of history or an unusual person in the area, call Alonzo Weston at 271-8574 (800) 779-6397 or e-mail him at alonzoweston@mpgco.com.

On a wing and a prayer



The P-51D Mustang escorts the B17 part way.



The view from just behind the seat of the bombardier, looking out the nose of the B-17G past the bombsight, center, and gun

controls, right, shows Nebraska farmlands as the plane flies along its route to St. Joseph.

By GARY CHILCOTE
Jews-Press/Gazette Staff Writer

"Sentimental Journey," the Confederate Air Force's historic B-17 "Flying Fortress," was greeted by crowds at Rosecrans Field when it arrived here for a three-day public exhibit in St. Joseph.

The hour-and-a-half flight from Hastings, Neb., emphasized the improvements today's commercial jet air travelers enjoy with speeds of 500 mph and altitudes of 30,000 to 40,000 ft.

In contrast, "Sentimental Journey" cruised at a leisurely 80 to 150 mph, and at altitudes



Paul Kelley flies as co-pilot for the flight from Hastings.

of 3,000 feet and less. Farms and cows zoomed up large in the cross-hairs of the once top-secret Norden bomb sight.

The four-engined plane sports the traditional Betty Grable pin-up on its nose, and bristles with 13 machine guns. ^{AL}

When the plane took off from the Hastings airport with occasional flames spurting inside the left, outboard engine, one wondered if Pilot Carl Schmieder of Phoenix and copilot Paul Kelley of Scottsdale, Ariz., were adding some simulated World War II combat excitement for the news media.

Instead, it was simply the same problem crews faced in the 1940s, piston-driven engines leaking oil. About 55 miles from St. Joseph, the engine was shut down and the propeller was "feathered" to keep it from spinning in the wind.

"It's not supposed to do that," explained crew member William Richardson, a gunner during the war, who watched as the feathered prop continued to turn.

Like the popular song of that era, "Coming in on a Wing and a

WII

," there was "one motor
but we still carried on,"
over St. Joseph on three
horsepower engines.

Hane accompanied the
mental Journey" in the
ed P-51 Mustang fighter
st 30 minutes, but the two
s have different flying

Jim Frame, who flew with
in the Mustang, the visit to
seph this weekend is a nos-
trip. Frame is the volun-
admaster and flight engi-
or the B-17.

ing World War II he was
ned at Rosecrans Field for
a year and a half. Frame
e still has some old aircraft
s from his Rosecrans Field

at happened to that new
e they built to Rosecrans
the river changed its
e," Frame asked, referring
MacArthur Drive viaduct.
it bridge is now more than
ears old, and was in such
condition a new deck had to
ured two years ago.

il Kelley flew B-17s for
than two years during the

got interested two years
he said of the Mesa, Ariz.,
derate Air Force organiza-
that flies the plane. "I got bit
e nostalgia bug, and started
the B-17 after being out of
years."

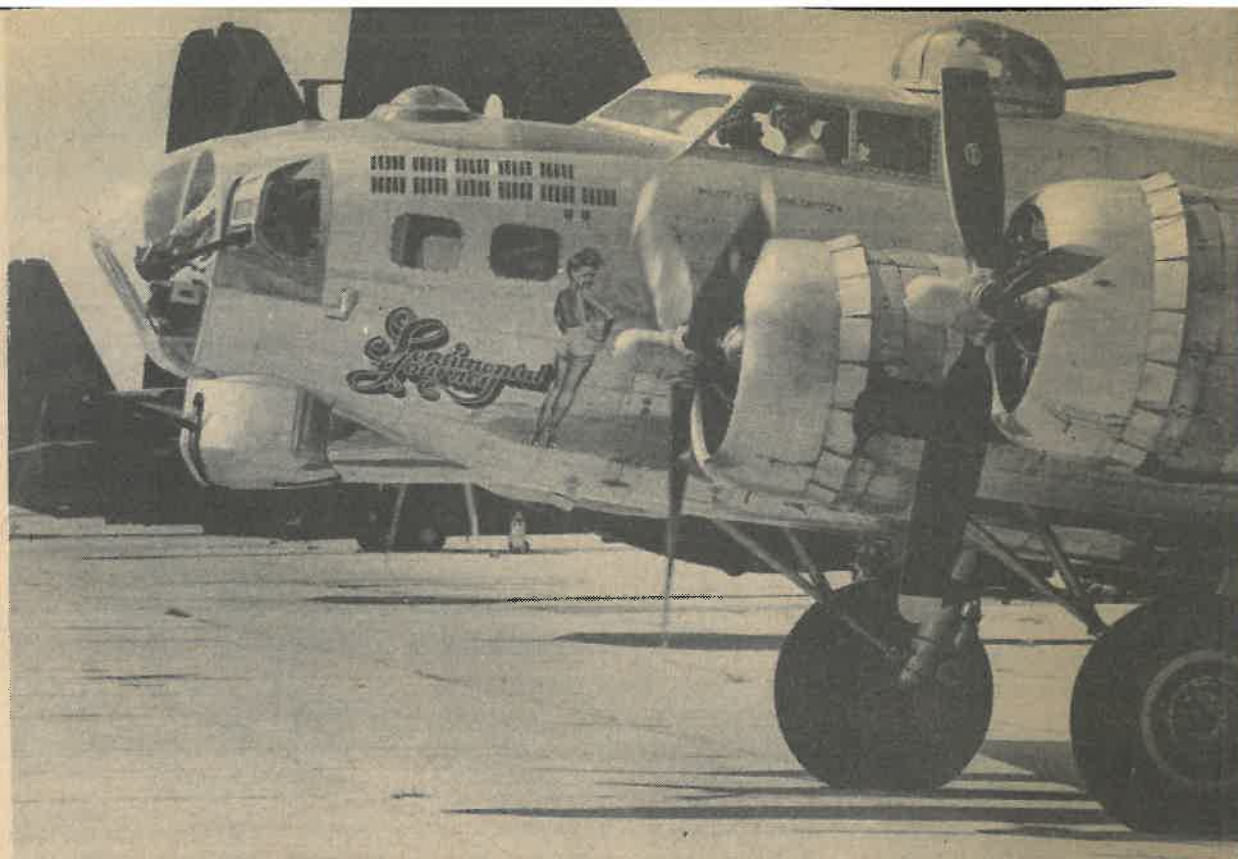
ley is a retired airline pilot
once flew practice missions
osecrans Field when TWA
it for training.

ry Patterson of Express
t, local sponsor of the B-17
said it will be open to the
c Sunday and Monday from
n. to 8 p.m.

ere is a \$3 charge to go
gh the plane, with the
y paying for the cost of fuel
ing it here, and to help pay
new hangar for the plane in
Ariz.

is morning, the Air National
d at Rosecrans will be per-
ng parachute aerial drops
flying C-130 transports in
ation. Maj. Gen. Charles
er, Missouri Adjutant Gen-
will be present for cere-
es marking the retirement
Joseph's Brig. Gen. John

e Air Guard activities,
ng about 10 a.m., will not be
to the public, but may be
ed from the city's portion of
irfield. The B-17 will be on
ay through Monday, and will
Rosecrans Tuesday morn-

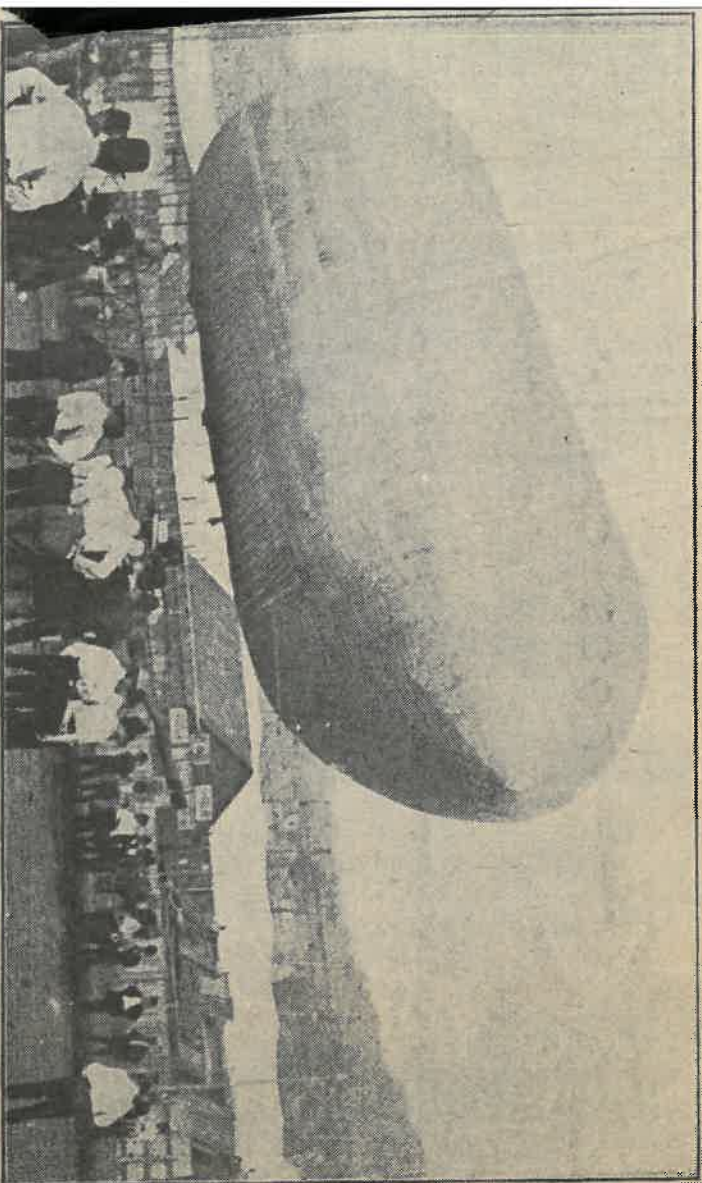


Staff photo by ERIC G. KEITH

The B-17 Flying Fortress taxis along the landing strip as it arrives at Rosecrans.



MP 8-19-88



BALDWIN DIRIGIBLE BALLOON. U.S. MILITARY TOURNAMENT, ST. JOSEPH, MO.

Show stopper

As one of the promotional efforts in behalf of the city and the then-new St. Joseph Stock Yards, John Donovan, "father" of the yards, induced the United States Army to hold a Military Tournament in St. Joseph. One of features of the

event, which took place just after the turn of the century, was the appearance in St. Joseph of the Baldwin Dirigible Balloon. (Reprints available for \$5 by contacting Mary Jane Carson at the St. Joseph News-Press & Gazette.)

aviation role takes flight at event

t' bragged poster
ary air tournament

they had built.

On Lake Contrary beach, the cavalry performed a water ballet of men on horseback. During rehearsal, Pvt. John McCawl of the 7th Cavalry fell into the lake and was crushed to death by his horse.

There were aeroplane flights, but possibly the biggest attraction was the hydrogen-filled dirigible, "Baldwin," which flew over the lake with Lt. B. D. Foulouis at the controls.

He was to have assisted the well-known navigator Lt. Thomas R. Selfridge in the flight. A day earlier Selfridge was killed at Fort Myer, Va. when his plane, piloted by aeroplanist Orville Wright, crashed when the wooden propeller broke.

Orville Wright was seriously injured. That same broken propeller is now on display at the Air Force Museum. Selfridge Air Force Base, Mt. Clemens, Mich., was named for the young aviator, who was secretary of the Aerial Experiment Association.

The association's president was Alexander Graham Bell, who attended Selfridge's funeral. President Theodore Roosevelt sent his condolences.

Almost overlooked were wireless demonstrations by the Army's signal corps. Messages by dot-dash were sent from long pole-like antennas to the top of nearby King Hill. Guglielmo Marconi had



Astronaut says flight rewards outweigh risks

Associated Press

SPACE CENTER, Houston — Marine Lt. Col. Dave Hilmers says the Challenger disaster made him realize the importance of explaining to his family how he feels about being an astronaut before he flew into space again.

"This is a dangerous world that we live in and I think that everyone should be ready to tell the people that they love how they feel and what they believe is important," said the former jet pilot, who will help deploy a \$100 million communications satellite on the Discovery mission.

"Where your faith lies, what your beliefs are, what you want them to accomplish in life — all these sorts of things."

HILMERS SAID THE rewards of being an astronaut outweigh any risks involved and he feels privileged to be flying on the first post-Challenger mission. But he acknowledged with a smile that his wife, Lynn, sometimes may wish he had picked a different profession.

Hilmers, 38, has two sons, Matthew, who will be 12 on Sept. 28, and Daniel, 9.

Hilmers grew up in DeWitt, Iowa, and graduated with a bachelor's degree in mathematics, summa cum laude, from Cornell College in 1972. He earned a master's degree in electrical engineering in 1977 and the

troops left a long column of dust as they rode here over 140 miles of unpaved roads. Some military units were here for almost two weeks.

To feed the troops each day required 4,000 pounds of meat, 4,000 loaves of bread, and 8,000 pounds of ice. The artillery brought in heavy guns and modern searchlights. Troops demonstrated their firepower by blowing up a 90-foot bridge

Flying was only a small part of the show, but it caught on, with St. Joseph staying on the leading edge of aviation for another three decades.

it assumed that waves across the ocean only three years before.

The dirigible was kept in a huge tent, but winds of 15 miles an hour were almost too much for it. Selfridge was to have assembled the dirigible, and pilot Foulis had never done it before. Hydrogen gas was generated by mixing 15 tons of iron filings with acid.

John Donovan, prominent in the livestock industry in St. Joseph, served as head of the military tournament. He brought such VIPs as Louis F. Swift, president of Swift & Co., and his family; Secretary of War Luke H. Wright; Army Chief of Staff Gen. Franklin Bell, and the governors of Missouri and Kansas.

At Lake Contrary, a giant tent near the fairgrounds could accommodate 10,000 people. Troops camped nearby in the area just north of the old amusement park.

ST. JOSEPH, MISSOURI
SEPTEMBER 21-26 '08
NOTHING LIKE IT IN HISTORY.

Odd flying machines promoted the military show in this 1908 poster.

So many extra electric lights were installed in St. Joseph that the power company suffered a brown-out when a boiler tube failed. It made it difficult to get people home from the lake by electric streetcar.

The new Hotel Robidoux's 170 rooms

were filled, and 10,000 visitors were housed in private homes for 50 cents a night.

Ads were seeking concrete workers at the site of the new City Auditorium, 4th and Faraon, but builders were displaced so the grand Military Ball could be held there.

Two incidents on opening day almost resulted in the Auditorium's destruction by fire. During the afternoon rehearsal a light bulb touched stage decorations which broke into flames. Edward A. Prinz, dance master, helped pull the material down and extinguish it.

Then during the evening, a photographer using flash powder for a picture from the balcony caught the bunting on fire. It was put out by those attending the dance.

The U.S. Military Tournament was such an elaborate event that it was never again tried. But the people of St. Joseph retained their interest in aviation, and in 1921 it hosted the International Balloon Races, again from Lake Contrary.

It was only four years later that the city dedicated its first Rosecrans Field - at Lake Contrary - as the city's new airport.

There were military parades each night, a livestock show at the stockyards and social events downtown.



The Mountain Battery of the Second Field Artillery is shown in action in this photo from the military show.

ler Is Silent Hero

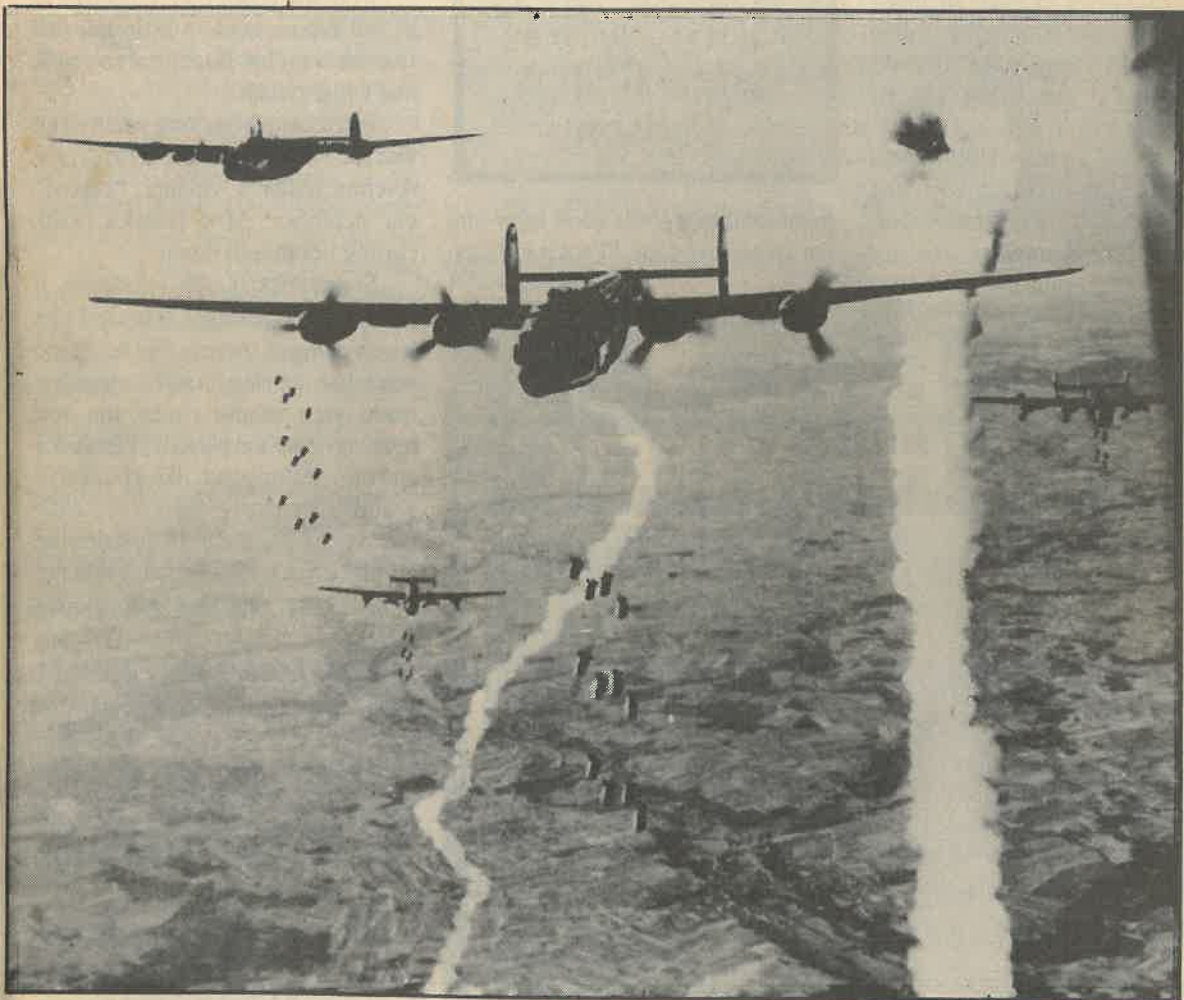
*captive liberated,
on Pierce survived
and returned home*

**This page is dedicated
to all South Siders
who served their country
during World War II.**

age. Perhaps now this pil-
age will have a healing or at
soothing effect upon all the
ing crew members and their
es. I know that the results of
ash must have been espec-
ard for the family of Sgt.
tson.

is ceremony also provides
portunity for me to apologize
good people of the Nether-
and especially you who live
area, for littering up your
ful countryside. I'm sorry."
e don't even pretend to be
," Arnett continued. "Actu-
e felt disappointment and
for having done so little.
re only on our third bomb-
ssion. We had great hopes
vidually inflicting signifi-
mage to Hitler's war mach-
t least the equivalence of a
—but I doubt it was more
in prick. It is evident from
g at our crew picture that
e not old professional war-
ome were barely out of
hool. The one thing we had
mon was that we had all
ered for flying duty. At
ne approximately three
before the Normandy inva-
undreds of bombers were
ent over Germany every
e were proud to be one of
y."

e were 72 new B-24 Liber-
with 72 new crews com-
l by Col. Snavley. The
Bomb Group was based at
Pickenham Air Base in



England and had only operated
eight days.

The crew spent two months
training at Salt Lake City, Utah,
and had two months' training at
Davis Monthan Air Base in
Tucson, Arizona. The crew then
spent four months at Alamogor-
do's Holoman Air Base in New
Mexico. After finishing training,

the crew was issued a new B-24,
worth \$250,000.

The crew flew the southern
route to Britain—over Florida,
Puerto Rico, Trinidad, Natal in
Brazil and Dakar and Merikesch
in Africa. Each plane and crew
was on its own. Axis Sally greeted
them.

Arnett led them in prayer under

craft in the water to put out the fire
or maneuvering it back over land,
but just the day before, the
operations officer had said the
floating time of a B-24 in the water
would be 11 seconds.

The crew was told it could bail
out, but the pilot and co-pilot would
ride it out. The crew assumed their
pre-arranged crash landing posi-

Clockwise from bottom: Photos of Don Pierce of St. Joseph which were taken when he was a prisoner-of-war in Germany. Members of the Boomerang crew were, back row, Charles Arnett, pilot; Lucian Stewart, co-pilot; Emie Gavitt, navigator, and Charles Vergos, bombardier. Front row, Arthur Oakes, nose gunner; Jack Burton, tail gunner; Jim Easley, flight engineer and waist gunner; Bill Lindopp, ball turret gunner; Pierce, turret operator; and Urtel Robertson, top radio operator. Don Pierce with the crew's mascot. The Boomerang was one of hundreds of planes dropping bombs on Germany the weeks before D-Day.

Gesundheitsfarbe: Gesund

