

Offbeat Oregon: Central Oregon's pioneer aviators

By Finn J.D. John
For The Sentinel

Part of the problem with owning and operating the only flight school in town in the 1920s and 1930s was, every time one of your students slapped together some home-built piece of kit, you'd be expected to help get it in the air.

At least, that seems to have been how it worked for Ted Barber, owner of Bend Flying Service and Central Oregon's first commercial aviator.

"I was never one to back away from adventure in an airplane," Barber wrote in his autobiography, "The Barnstorming Mustang." "I always figured airplanes were made to fly, and I was made to fly them."

This was a nice general principle, but it's easy to see how applying it too generously could shorten a fellow's life a bit.

Luckily for Ted, building a home-built in the inter-war years was not easy to do. The problem wasn't with engineering — there were plenty of good workable plans for home-built airplanes, and lots of people could and did put them together in barns and sheds.

The problem was with power. It was hard to find an engine lightweight enough to get off the ground with an airplane attached to it. Especially in the thin air of the Central Oregon high desert, 3,500 feet above sea level.

Every now and then, though, someone would come up with something; and Ted would have to choose between telling the student "no" and helping him fly the thing.

And by "helping him fly it," I mean "go first."

This came close to cooking Ted Barber's goose one day in the early 1930s when the Stevens brothers called him over to check out their homebuilt: a super-light parasol-wing monoplane with a super-heavy Ford Model T engine bolted to the front. The brothers hoped that the lightness of the airframe would make up for the fact that the flathead flivver mill weighed close to 500 pounds, while putting out less than 20 horsepower.

Ted walked around the

airplane, inspecting it carefully. Other than that cast-iron hunk of dead weight hanging off the front firewall, it was a beautifully done piece of equipment, and he told them so.

Then, foolishly, he told them he'd fly it for them.

Or maybe not so foolishly. Because here's the thing — Model T motors were everywhere. They were probably the easiest and cheapest kind of power plant you could find in the 1930s.

If the Stevens brothers had really done what they'd set out to do — created a new airplane design that could actually be powered in flight by a Model T engine — it could actually make them some money. Nobody had been able to do that before, and what Ted was looking at now seems to have convinced him that maybe, just maybe, they had.

Ted climbed in and started the motor up. The familiar putt-putt of a Model T greeted his ears. He taxied to the edge of the field and paused, letting the motor warm up.

Then he opened the throttle wide, and the little homebuilt started gathering speed down the field.

About halfway down, Ted pulled back on the stick. The little plane lifted off, hung a second, and dropped back onto the field. He tried again. Same result.

The engine was literally about two horsepower short of what it would take to fly the plane.

But Ted liked what little he had seen of the plane's handling. He taxied back over to where the Stevens boys were waiting, looking crestfallen, beside the field.

"Let's wait until we get a little wind, boys," he said. "We'll

give 'er a try again."

Several days later, with a gentle steady breeze blowing along the airfield, the three of them returned to Knotts Field for a second run.

This time, it worked. Ted pulled back on the stick, and the little flathead-four motor roared valiantly, and the tiny plane lifted off and went into a very, very slow climb as it neared the end of the field.

The Stevens boys cheered as they watched it rise to about 300 feet ... and then they stopped cheering as it leveled off and started slowly sinking.

Meanwhile, in the cockpit, Ted was nervously scanning the ground in front of him. The Model T engine was making just barely enough power to keep the plane in the air, at full throttle. He hoped it wouldn't quit from the strain.

He didn't have enough power to try any turns; he'd have to go straight ahead and hope for the best. Scanning his memory of the local geography, he remembered that there was a field a couple miles ahead — but it was strewn with lava rocks. He'd for sure hit one, and break the plane.

But five miles beyond that was a big open field. Could he make it?

He glanced over his shoulder to see how much ground he'd covered since leaving the airfield — and that's when he really became nervous.

Because hanging in the air behind the little airplane was a great billowy contrail of steam. He was two miles into a seven-mile flight and the engine was already overheating.

Would it make it? Would he make it if it didn't?

Ted focused on the task. The little airplane droned

on, its engine getting hotter and hotter. Sooner or later it would seize up

Then the field was in front of him, and he was touching down, and bouncing to a stop. The steam poured out and surrounded him like a fog bank as he climbed gratefully down from the plane. He probably felt like kissing the ground.

As a side note, it's interesting to speculate on what the Stevens plane could have done on an airfield in the Willamette Valley. It's pretty likely that if he'd been taking off from, say, the Eugene airport — elevation 374 feet, more than 3,000 feet lower than Bend — he would have been able to do a lot more with the little plane.

With another homebuilt that Ted was supposed to try out, he was saved from having to risk his neck by the builder's impatience. Eddie Campbell of Prineville had, in 1930, got hold of the plans for a homebuilt design called "The Storms Flying Flivver," a tiny high-wing monoplane powered by a Ford Model A engine.

The Model A engine was roughly the same size and weight as the Model T, but made twice as much power. And Eddie worked at a Ford dealership's repair facility, so he had access to the equipment necessary to soup it up a bit.

Ted was out of town for a week when Eddie finished his project, and not expected back for another four days. Eddie, already a fairly experienced glider pilot, grew impatient. Plus, it was his plane; he wanted to be the first to fly it.

So, he pulled it out and fired it up and pointed it down the field.

It would not take off. He tried it several times; at the proper speed, it simply would not leave the ground.

Eddie looked it over, scratched his head, and decided the problem was that it was "nose heavy." Getting his tools out, he took the wing loose and moved it a little bit forward. Then he climbed back in to try again.

This time, the plane came off the ground, all right. It went straight into a steep climb, completely ignoring Eddie's attempts to control it; stood on its tail, trying to hang from the prop, about 100 feet in the air; then stalled and pitched forward and slammed down into the ground, nose first, ending up in a tangled heap.

Eddie's friends gaped at the wreckage. Nothing moved in it. "Eddie's killed!" they shouted in horror, then raced to the scene.

They found Eddie slumped motionless amid the wreckage. Fearful of a fire breaking out, they each seized

one of his shoulders and started trying to drag him out.

"Hey, you guys!" Eddie suddenly called out. "Take it easy, will you? ... My feet are stuck right through the firewall. You've got to get a saw and cut me out."

They did so, then hustled him to the doctor's to get checked out. His skull was cracked, and he later learned that one of his leg bones also had been cracked; but overall, he came out of the experience not much worse for wear.

The same couldn't be said of the Storms Flying Flivver, though.

[Sources: Barber, Ted. The Barnstorming Mustang. Bend: Barber Industries, 1987; Anderson, Jim. "Pioneer Pilots of the Sagebrush Country," Little Known Tales from Oregon History, Vol. 1 (Geoff Hill, ed.). Bend: Sun Publishing, 1988]

Finn J.D. John teaches at Oregon State University and writes about odd tidbits of Oregon history. For details, see <http://finnjohn.com>. Contact him at finn2@offbeatoregon.com.

Are you a Chamber Member?
Ask us how you can become a member today!

Contact Travis Palmer,
Director of the
Chamber of Commerce
(541) 942-241
travis@cgchamber.com





- The Northwest's Finest Gardening Seed
- Flowers, Herbs, & Shrubs
- Vegetable Transplants
- Fruit Trees

20 Palmer Ave. • Cottage Grove • (541) 942-0510

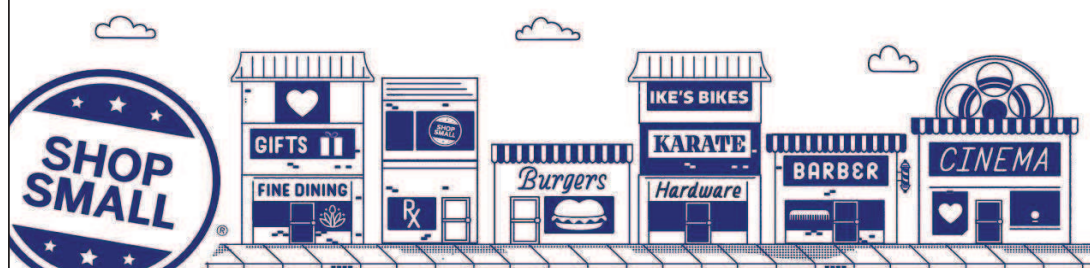
★ SMALL BUSINESS SATURDAY® ★

NOV 24

Proudly Backed by 

Cottage Grove
Sentinel

A PART OF YOUR COMMUNITY
SINCE 1889



Cottage Grove
Sentinel

The Holiday Gift That Keeps Giving



Special Gift
Subscription
Rates*

20 Weeks for \$16.50
52 Weeks for \$31.00

Includes FREE e-Edition Access

Local News, Events &
Information, Weekly Coupon Savings
Shopping Circulars & Special Offers
Local Jobs, Real Estate & Classifieds
Puzzles, Comics, Contests & Fun
Local Dining & Entertainment Updates
& So Much More

Order Today!

*Offer good through 12/19/18. Mention this ad, or use code MM517at checkout. This offer is not transferable and the offer is available those who have not subscribed in the last 31 days. Special introductory offers are limited to no more than two special subscriptions in a twelve month period and must be paid in advance to qualify for special rate. Once the above discounted period ends, you will be billed at the regular subscription rates.

Local News & So Much More

Cottage Grove
Sentinel

In Print, Mobile & Online • 541.942.3325 • www.cgsentinel.com